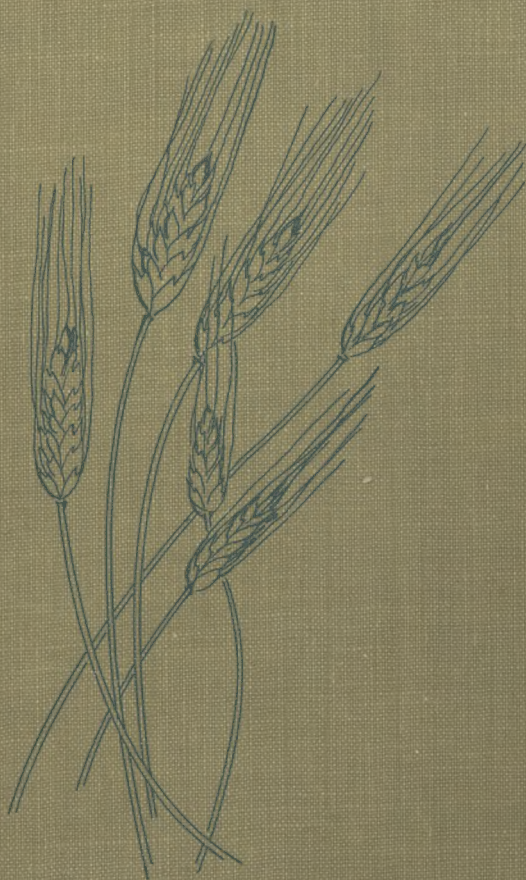


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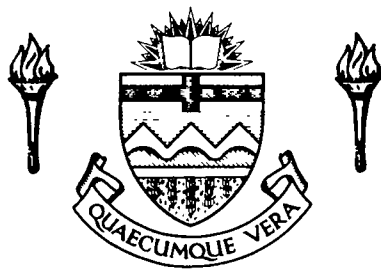
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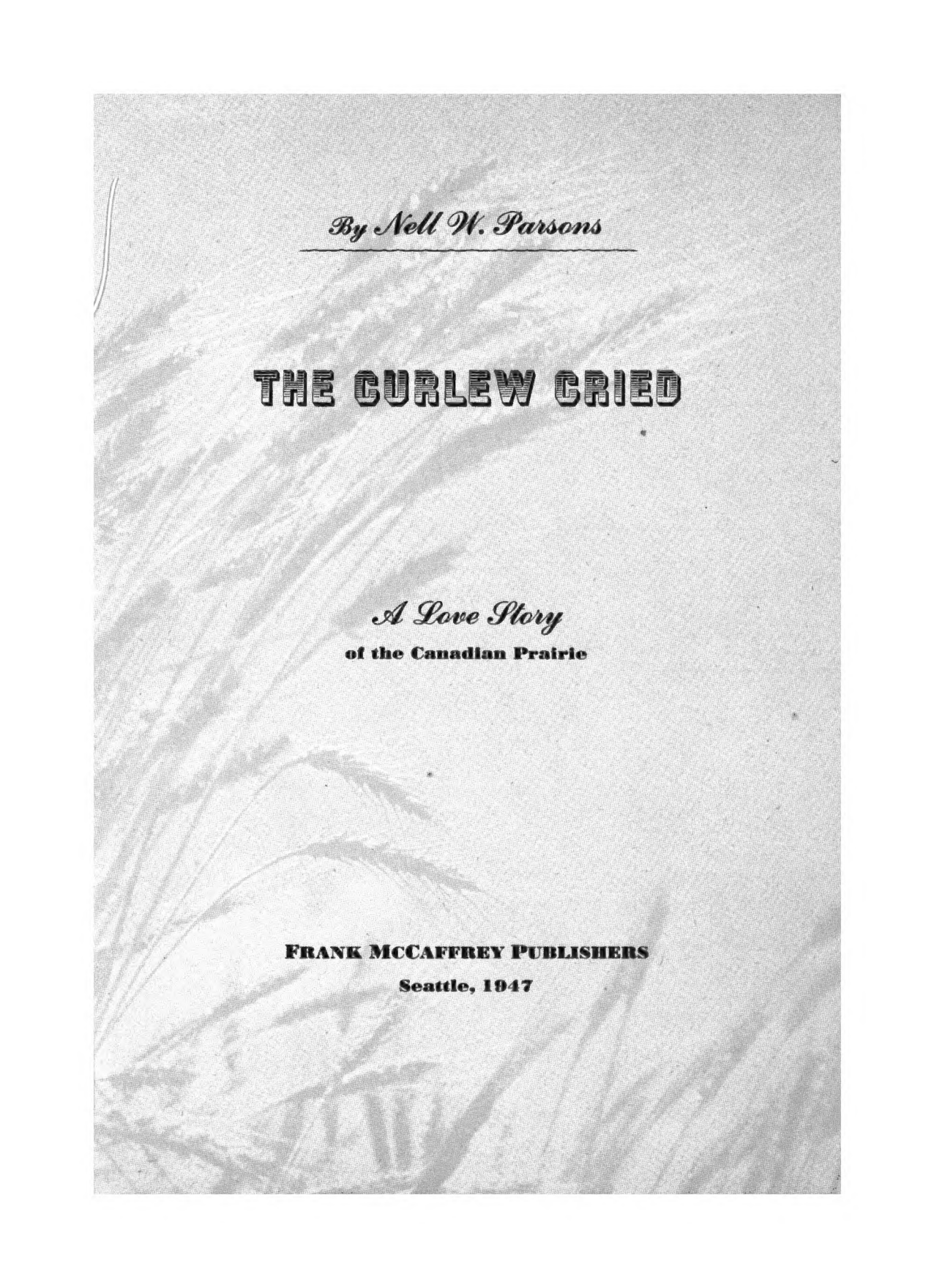
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By Nell W. Parsons

THE CURLEW CRIED

A Love Story
of the Canadian Prairie

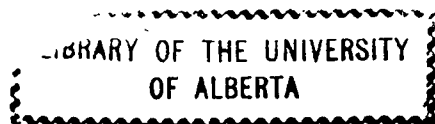
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TO MY MOTHER,

Ann Wilson,

AND MY FAVORITE AUNT,

Rachel Jessop.

BOTH KNEW THE
EARLY DAYS OF THE
CANADIAN PRAIRIE
WHICH LANE JARVIS
LOVED.

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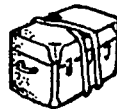


Foreword. *The descriptions of the Canadian prairie in this book are true to the land I knew as a child. But readers will search in vain for the exact location of Jarvis Prairie itself.*

The site of Lane Jarvis' land might have been in any one of a hundred spots on the Saskatchewan plains between the American border and Regina, since as many places underwent, in that same period, like growth and progress.

The characters herein described are completely fictitious, too, though thousands of gently reared women went through pioneer conditions like those Victoria Jarvis encountered. Many men fought, as Lane Jarvis fought, to make their dreams come true. However, any reader who knows the plains of Canada and the mid-western United States will recognize the curlew as being real enough, whether they know the graceful bird with its lonely cry as snipe or curlew.

NELL W. PARSONS



Chapter 1. The late afternoon sun was warm for early April, but the stiff wind felt edged with bitter chill, after one had faced it over more than thirty miles of Canadian prairie trail. The monotonous jolt and creak of the wagon, the soft sucking of mud, and the ceaseless sway of the high spring seat had grown painfully irksome. Victoria Jarvis blinked wearily against the everlasting sameness of the treeless land, and moved closer to the man at her side. The vastness and the almost utter emptiness of the prairie in that year of 1908 were terrifying to a newcomer.

"Tired, Tory?" Lane Jarvis asked quickly, smiling down at her with tenderness in his dark eyes. His smile deepened two creases in his lean and permanently tanned face. There was a cleft in his rugged chin, and it deepened, too, when he smiled.

Tory loved to watch that cleft. It gave aliveness and still more strength to her husband's handsome face. She loved, too, his powerful, vibrant voice. But it was Lane's eyes which stirred her most. They were black and fathomless, and Tory had learned already how quickly their expression could change from confidence to restless doubt, from boundless eagerness to near-despair.

Now her smile flashed quickly in response to his, and she replied to his question.

"Oh, I'm just ra—ther weary." The soft English accent matched the fair transparency of Tory's skin and her deceptively fragile appearance. She straightened her shoulders a little in an effort to dispel the weariness of muscle and nerve,

and there was pride in her smile as she looked into Lane's eyes.

She could hardly believe it possible that she, Victoria Sewell, who had sailed from Liverpool a fortnight earlier to marry a childhood sweetheart in Winnipeg, had actually married instead this tall and arrogant stranger she had never seen until she boarded the boat!

It had been raining as the boat pulled away from the dock that day. Blinded by tears as she waved at her mother somewhere in the blurred crowd, her chilled and unsteady fingers had fumbled vainly for her handkerchief. A masculine hand had thrust forth a large linen square. When she had dried her eyes she looked up and saw Lane Jarvis for the first time.

She thrilled again now, as she had then, to his magnificent brashness, to the power that was in his hard muscles, even to the hint of ruthlessness that was in his strength. In that very first moment she had felt hitherto unsuspected depths within herself irresistibly stirred.

Victoria Sewell had been reared in the traditions of stiff British reserve. She had been steeped in stern Victorian inhibitions. So at first she had fought against the tide of her feelings. And even in the early days of the brief shipboard courtship, she recognized in Lane some desperate moodiness that was at variance with his merrier moments.

But of one thing she had been instantly sure. She had never loved Harry Watts as she loved Lane Jarvis, and the love would be worth whatever it cost. At least that was what her heart sang confidently. As she looked up into her husband's eyes now, serenity came into Victoria's face. That face was, in a way, self-contradictory. Her very blue eyes seemed childishly innocent, until one noticed their steadiness. Below her straight and lovely nose her lips were firm, wilful, unafraid.

The horses splashed through pools of snow water on the springy, uneven trail. The grass showed a faint green at the

roots, though here and there crumbling snowbanks lingered on the north side of slopes and hillocks. The air was sharp with a smell of freshness and of staleness blended together—last year's grass and the new life the melting snow was stirring.

Lane sniffed the air, and lifted an arm to indicate a remnant of snow they passed.

"Aren't those rotting drifts—beautiful, the way they cuddle the ground?" he asked softly.

"Beautiful?" Tory shivered involuntarily. She had thought the left-over signs of winter ugly and severe. Lane lapsed into sudden silence after her shudder of distaste, and she wished then that she had agreed with him. In a way, she supposed, the prairie *was* beautiful—if illimitable space and almost total emptiness could have beauty.

They rode in silence for a time, until Lane suddenly pointed out a long ridge before them.

"From the brow of that hill we'll be able to see the farm." Eagerness and pride were in his voice. He glanced complacently at the load behind them in the high wagon box. There were bags of flour and of sugar. Tins of tomatoes and boxes of tea. There was a great can of kerosene, with a shriveled little potato stuck on the end of the pouring spout. There was also a roll of barbed wire. On top of everything rode Tory's sturdy British trunk of tin, and a large wooden box containing the Belleek tea set the choir had given her as a wedding gift.

Tory's glance followed Lane's and she, too, surveyed the mixed load. She smiled slightly, wondering without particularly caring, what those friends back home, who had given her the dishes, would think when they heard she had not married Harry Watts. Just now England and the life she had left seemed unreal and far away—a different world.

Lane was solid reality. She put out her hand to his strong brown one, and felt swift pride in his enthusiasms and in

his flamboyant good looks. Harry's touch had never given her such a wild, sweet thrill. What had Harry thought—how had he felt—when he got her letter telling him she had married a Saskatchewan farmer she had met on the boat?

All at once the horses lifted their heads and stepped faster, knowing that over the ridge lay the home barns and feed. The low sun glinted on colored spreader rings and bright harness buckles. Lane looked at the splendidly matched bays with indulgent pride and Tory felt in him some suppressed yet mighty excitement. It was perceptible in his quickened breathing and in a slight twitching of his massive shoulders.

Suddenly, as if the strong feeling must come out, he threw back his head with its glistening disorder of curling black hair, and began to sing:

*"O Canada, my home, my native land,
Loyal and free, beneath thy flag I stand—"*

The strong and confident words seemed perfectly suited to the rich and powerful timbre of Lane's voice. They had a quality peculiarly fitted to the harsh and lonely land. Tory turned her head quickly in surprise.

"Why, Lane! I didn't know you could sing." She was delighted.

But a sudden bleakness came into Lane's eyes. With an utterly male gesture he drew her close in one arm, held her so tightly against his hard body that she could not draw breath.

"There are many things about me that you don't know, darling, and thank God you don't," he muttered fervently. Then he released her suddenly and stared down the trail, as if holding himself braced against some expected shock.

The startling vehemence of Lane's words thrust sharp foreboding through the joy Tory had felt a moment before, and her heart cried out against any threat there might be

in them. Looking at her husband's stern profile, she saw again a hint of the moody desperation she had glimpsed earlier. She shivered with a chill not altogether due to the piercing wind. That wild spirit of Lane's was thrilling, but disturbing, too.

Suddenly the wagon topped the rise. For a moment they seemed poised between two worlds. Behind them lay the long, unbroken plain they had crossed since leaving Flatland and the railroad early that morning. Before them the land was a rolling country reaching to a far horizon. On the brink of a coulee perhaps a mile distant stood a cluster of farm buildings.

Lane's moodiness dropped from him instantly. He leaned forward, his dark eyes glowing like a boy's.

"There it is! Jarvis Prairie." A wide sweep of his arm indicated the plowed fields, the corrals and the buildings. There were numerous barns and sheds with fenced enclosures behind them. Nearer the trail and a little apart, sat a tiny gray shack with an almost flat roof and a narrow lean-to added at one side.

Beyond the buildings the trail looped away into incredible distances, lost here and there behind a knoll, or in a coulee fold, as it crossed the empty land. Shafts of late sunlight touched far-off hills with shadow-edged gilt which grew paler and paler until the hazy, remote horizon blotted light and shadow together.

Tory saw all this in one sweeping glance before she brought her eyes back to those buildings and the more immediate landscape. Opposite the farmyard a dark bluff rose to dominate the scene. It stood aloof in shadowed frowning silence, as if it knew some bitter secret from the past of the passively violent land. Tory shuddered involuntarily.

"Best land south of Regina!" Lane declared eagerly, "and see my horses in the corrals?" Pride was in his voice.

In fifteen days Tory had learned that when Lane spoke

of his land or his horses there was in him a bubbling enthusiasm strong as the force of the spring season which stirred the soil about them to new life. It was a force unseen, but unmistakably felt, in the fertile sogginess of the earth, and in the waiting silence of the sod. And as Tory looked down that mile-long slope at her future home, as she felt the force that stirred Lane, excitement stirred her, too.

The team trotted briskly forward. The trail twisted around a small knoll and then, without any warning at all, it revealed a stark new shack which the knoll had concealed. Tory realized the place was plainly visible from Lane's buildings a half mile away.

At her side she felt the quick stiffening of Lane's back, as he stared at the new place. For a full minute he did not speak. Then he sighed without pleasure.

"Well, guess the great migration has reached Jarvis Prairie."

They were abreast of the new shack now. It was unfinished. The doorsill was two feet above the ground, and no step broke the distance. Shingles for the roof were heaped in the yard. A short distance beyond was a makeshift shed of poles and straw.

A girl's face appeared at the shack's one window. Tory caught a glimpse of wide, half-frightened eyes in a white face, of braided hair hanging over a slender shoulder against a faded dress. It was only a glimpse, however. The face was gone almost at once.

"Looks like you've got close neighbors, Mrs. Jarvis," Lane said without enthusiasm. He was looking beyond the crude barn to where, in an angle near the trail, a man was picking rock with a crowbar. Near him, a dejected horse stood motionless before a partially loaded stoneboat. Tory looked with interest at the platform-like vehicle on its low, axe-hewn runners. As the wagon passed, the thin horse shifted a foot and lifted its head hopefully.

The slight and altogether harmless movement brought the toiling man's unshaven face up sharply. He did not glance at the wagon passing, but stared malevolently at his horse. He was a man of middle age or past and his surly face was covered with a ten-day beard. Altogether he was a disagreeable picture. He wore dirty clothes, and tobacco juice dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

The standing horse moved a foot experimentally, a movement so slight that it failed to tighten the harness tugs. But the small motion displeased the man. He brought the iron crowbar down across the bony rump in a blow so sudden and vicious that the horse's hind legs momentarily folded under the impact.

Almost at once, however, the horse recovered. Except for a pitiful quivering of nostrils it stood motionless again. But by that time Lane had halted his own team and leaped to the ground.

"You—you damned skunk!" he cried angrily, striding over until he towered over the surprised homesteader. "I've a damned good notion to wrap that crowbar round your filthy neck."

Sitting tense on the wagon seat, Tory was as astonished as the gaping man who cringed before Lane. This was a Lane she had not seen before, and violent as his anger was, it gave her a thrill to know that he championed the defenseless horse, that injustice could move him to such instant response.

Then the stranger recovered from his surprise and found his voice. He brought the iron bar forward in a threat at Lane.

"You—you—" he sputtered, "you goddam interferin' fool! You got no right to stop me beatin' my horse effen he needs it." He spat at Lane's feet and his pale, narrowed eyes gleamed wickedly.

Tory saw the stealthy movement first and cried out in warning.

"Lane! Be careful!"

But her warning was not necessary. As the man brought the bar up swiftly Lane wrenched it from his hands and threw it far in the short brown grass.

The undersized homesteader trembled with impotent fury.

"You cain't—cain't—" His stuttering died and he retreated hastily before the steely contempt in Lane's eyes. But when Lane stood, showing no intention to follow his hasty retreat, the man's abusive voice grew more bold.

"You git offen my land, you—you *dude*," he screamed. "Dude. Goddam fancy DUDE." He derided Lane's cloth coat and the light waistcoat under it, across which Lane wore a gold chain fashioned of intricately interwoven, miniature horseshoes. As the late sunlight gleamed on the chain, the man's stained lips continued to sputter. "DUDE! DUDE!" he repeated childishly.

Lane shrugged indifferently, turning back to his wagon. He paused beside the abused horse long enough to rub the still-quivering muzzle. There was compassion in his dark eyes.

He stepped easily, nonchalantly, up over the wheel and took the reins again, but Tory was trembling. She looked quickly toward the squalid shack.

The enraged homesteader caught the glance. She felt his eyes upon her bright brown hair and upon her figure; felt them, too, on her toes, just showing where her feet were braced against the front of the wagon and where her long skirt failed quite to reach. She resisted an impulse to pull her woolen jacket more closely over the sheer lawn blouse she wore.

Now that Lane was back on the wagon, the man grew noisily profane. "Git goin' and don't set foot on my land agin, you—you woman-chasin' swell! I've heerd about you,

afore I set foot in this part of the country. And that stuck-up Missus of your'n hadn't better come snoopin' round here, either." Profanity flowed on.

As their wagon moved away, Tory cringed and shrank at the words the man was screaming after them. Nothing in her gentle upbringing had prepared her for this. She felt outraged and violated. But Lane laughed heartily, as if the entire episode amused him greatly. Finally the rumble of the wheels drowned the man's voice.

"Why does he hate you?" she asked when they were out of earshot. Lane's indifference to the profane language shocked her a little. In her lap her hands gripped together nervously, and there was a nasty lump in her throat.

Lane shrugged carelessly. "How should I know? I never saw him before."

As they rolled swiftly down the trail homeward, he did not look back. He was looking forward. There was eagerness and excitement in his face. In one of the corrals ahead a horse nickered. The sound was like a bugle to the tired horses. They stepped out with lengthened stride; their quick trot became a fast, uneven gallop. Home stables were near and it was feeding time.

Lane smiled radiantly at Tory. The smile reassured her, but at the same time she was sharply aware of how little she knew Lane Jarvis.



Chapter 2. Suddenly the buildings were directly before them, and there was the music of rushing creek water in their ears, the smell of it in the air. It was a smell of melted snow and sodden grass; of space and virgin sod. It was a smell sharp and heady with the freshness of spring.

"Who lives there?" Tory pointed out a rooftop barely visible behind a knoll to the south.

"That's Sandy's shack. But he's been living here this winter, looking after my horses. I am afraid Jarvis Prairie is rather a lonely spot, Tory." He looked about with the genuine air of having only this moment recognized the fact. "Just Sandy and me—and now this newcomer." He added as an afterthought.

"Does someone live there?" Tory had seen another building. It was a low, drab shack across the creek which swirled at the bottom of the slope beyond Lane's place. Now, with the sun almost touching the horizon, that shack was shadowed by the bleak bluff Tory had noted from the ridge. "Whose place is that?"

"It—it belongs to me. I bought the land, last fall. It gives me more of the creek, and added pasture for the stock, below the bluff. We call that bluff—Sentinel Hill." His voice was suddenly expressionless and almost curt.

Feeling restraint in him, Tory glanced up quickly. Lines of weariness were etched in the tanned face. His chin was thrust out, almost in defiance. And in his eyes had come a cold remoteness which hurt her until she sensed a reality

of pain underneath. Then she had an impulse to place her hand over his fingers again.

However, before she could lift her arm a dog's sharp bark shattered the air, and a black and white streak was whirling across the yard toward the wagon.

"Look, there's old Rover coming to meet us. And Sandy is getting the horses into the corrals. God, but it's good to get home!" Excitement and pleasure trembled in his voice and his unexplained mood of a moment before was gone. Already Tory knew that his moods were like that, mercurial and shifting, like shadow and light.

Feeling his intensity, the team tossed heads wildly, and drew the wagon down the springy trail at a still faster pace. Rover leaped and whirled, barking in loud, staccato joy.

"Rover. Good old boy!" Lane shouted with the shrill, exuberant pleasure of a youngster. The dog rolled on the ground frenziedly, then leaped, yapping and panting, against the wheels.

Tory's eyes were swiftly picking out details about the place. The many corrals, where whinnying shapes with flying manes and tails were Lane's beloved horses. The barns—the incredibly small house close beside the road. And that stocky man moving from the barn to meet them would be Sandy, of course.

Beyond the buildings the slope dropped gently toward the creek. The leafless brush of wild rose thicket and saskatoon bush made dark smudges here and there along the bank. Rising steeply beyond the narrow strip of water was the barren face of the bluff.

Abruptly, the lower edge of the sun slipped behind the hill. And like a swift, sinister hand the shadow of Sentinel Hill spanned the coulee, leaping creek and slope and the sodden, black furrows of Lane's fireguard, as if it reached inexorably to touch Tory and Lane.

Unaccountably chilled, Tory saw something she had not

seen at first. On the top of that forbidding bluff, at a point opposite the unpainted house which from this day forward was to be her home, the slender pickets of a small square of fence gleamed white in the sun's last rays.

That morning Tory would not have known what those white pickets meant in the violent isolation of the country. But tonight she *did* know, and all her being shrank from the knowledge. The memory of a place they had passed at mid-day flashed through her mind.

They had approached a silent and isolated homestead in the bright noonday sun. Tory had looked with interest at the unpainted buildings. A man had waved from the barn. A sad-eyed and prematurely aged woman had stood in the doorway of the house and silently watched them pass.

Tory had felt an urge to wave, but then she had caught sight of the small picket fence beyond the house, and the three small mounds with their pathetic, homemade crosses.

A sharp, shocked intake of breath had wiped her smile away.

"O-oh, what—happened?"

"Diphtheria," Lane answered briefly, adding, as a half consolation to the shocked concern in Tory's voice, "but it happened ten years ago. It was their first winter here. The prairie was really lonely then."

"B—but a thing like that couldn't happen now, Lane?" There was fear in her voice.

"The prairie can be tough on women," Lane confessed. "I've heard that Martin plans to pull out this fall. He's a long way from water here."

So now, looking across Lane's creek in the lonely evening light, Tory knew exactly what a picket fence meant. And as the rapidly sinking sun shadow-striped the land through the enormously lengthened pickets, the moving wagon met alternate bars of shadow and of light. The vehicle moved

forward through those bars—click—click—click—*dark—light—dark—*

Tory was trembling when the team stopped before Lane's house a minute later. The sun was gone now. Incredibly far away the sky remained bright with an afterglow of turquoise and lemon and flame. But all the prairie land was suddenly bleak and chill with winter's leftover shadows. In her throat, Tory's breath made a sound that was unmistakably a sob.

But Lane did not hear. He was standing up, surveying everything with pride.

"Here we are!" The expectancy in his vibrant voice begged for her approval of his land.

She braced up and tried valiantly to smile, while lesser details of the place registered upon her consciousness. The farm implements in orderly rows inside the fireguard. The haystacks back of the barns. And a wild bird which winged a swift, graceful circle over the house, before veering away into the twilight with a strange, wild cry.

"Hello, Sandy," Lane shouted. "I've brought a surprise."

Sandy Cameron grinned up at Tory and the kindness in his keen eyes warmed her heart. She hoped the father she could not remember had looked like Sandy.

"Dinna tell me," he said to Lane in a soft, Scotch burr, "that ye've brought a bride to Jarvis Prairie?"

Tory was grateful for the approval in Sandy's eyes, as Lane placed an arm proudly about her shoulders.

"This is Victoria," he announced. "Tory to us, Sandy. I've explained to her that the prairie is no place for a Victoria."

Lane drew her to her feet and Sandy extended a hand to help her down. Lane leaped to the ground on the opposite side of the rig as Tory put her cold fingers into the elderly Scot's gnarled hand. She was going to like Sandy. All at

once the wild music of the creek below seemed to flow melodiously over everything like a rapturous spring lullaby.

"Well, lassie," Sandy's rich burr was music, too, "If ever-r a woman was needit about a place, this is the place. And if ever-r a mon needit a woman's understanding, yon's the mon." He spoke softly, nodding briefly toward Lane, who had paused before the team and was standing motionless, surveying yard and barns and darkening slope.

It seemed to Tory as she watched him that the noise of the creek grew suddenly louder, a roar which blended land and sky and man and spring into a strange, exciting symphony. But perhaps it was just that as dusk blurred out the distance the noise of the rushing water seemed to dominate the whole.

As Lane paused, there came from far across the creek like an eerie warning, the lonely cry of that solitary bird again. The sound evidently pleased Lane. He lifted a hand in an odd half salute, before he turned eagerly back to Sandy.

"How are the mares? The stallion? Any foals yet?" Without waiting for an answer he rushed on, "I've brought enough wire for another corral. I suppose we'll have to fence that slope soon, too."

Sandy smiled indulgently.

"Ever-rything is fir-st rate. Red Top has foaled. Moll will be next, I'm thinkit. Pitch seems in fine form. He's fair impatient for a long rrun. Ye'll be busy, mon."

Lane's eyes glowed, and his black hair glistened as he bent toward Tory, speaking quickly.

"Wait until you see Pitch, the stallion. Coat like black satin. Black Arabs are rare, you know. He has powerful legs, too, and fire in his eyes. He's wild as the prairie wind—but he can be gentle, too." He was like a proud father describing a favorite child.

"He loves naught but his horses, lass," Sandy put in with

dry humor. "Sometimes I think he's a bit daft." Then he added with worried haste, "O'course I dinna mean that."

"The prairie is going to need horses." Lane was thinking aloud. "Later, there will be more railroads and more towns. But now settlers live sixty and seventy miles from post offices and doctors. There's a need for tough, fast horses to cover the distances. And bronco horses *are* tough."

"Lad, let the horses wait now," Sandy reproved gently. "Go away inside wi' the lass. She'll be famished after the long ride." He took the reins firmly out of Lane's hands.

Truthfully, Tory had not minded the delay. After the long inaction of the day, her feet were numb, wooden. Motion felt strange as she moved at Lane's side toward the door.

"Hear that creek," he demanded with satisfaction, pausing on the smooth stepping stone before the door.

"I—hear it." Tory replied faintly, trying to decide if the rushing water sang or hissed, and if the sky was really thick blue plush which was being rapidly tufted with glittering, pale gilt buttons.

Everything was so different from what she had pictured it in her mind! Yet the space, the emptiness, and the distances of the lusty land were exactly as Lane had described. He had said it was lonely. But until now she had not truly known the meaning of loneliness.

There were other impressions. She felt, rather than heard, the soundless noise that was the stirring of life in the roots beneath the tough brown sod everywhere. It was a force under her feet. Tory sensed it unmistakably.

"All right, Mrs. Jarvis," Lane's voice brought her thoughts back abruptly. "Do I carry you in?"

She laughed shakily, and Lane picked her up. He carried her through the narrow lean-to which extended along the east side of the shack. She glimpsed a disorder of buckets

and shoes, of old papers and discarded farm garments. Then Lane planted her feet firmly inside the house.

The single room was warm, but the primitive bareness of it was a shock to Tory, even though Lane had described the house precisely, with due warning. It was perhaps twelve by sixteen feet in size. There were two high-set windows, one looking north toward the barns, the other overlooking the trail. From it one could probably see the west-tilting slope and the point where the trail crossed the creek. Probably, too, one could see the ridge from which Tory had had her first glimpse of Lane's farm.

The homemade tables and chairs were plain and stout. An iron bed was neatly made up with heavy blankets of red wool. A coal fire burned in the black cookstove. Between the studdings on the unplastered walls, shelves were nailed at convenient intervals.

Tory smiled wanly. The place was elegant of course, in comparison to some they had passed on the way out from Flatland today. But the cramped smallness of it appalled her. She thought of her girlhood home, filled with heavy mahogany furniture generations old, and of the silver tea service on her mother's dining-room dresser.

Feeling her silence, Lane turned from stirring the fire. His eyes followed hers about the mean room.

"I—I guess it's pretty small," he said apologetically. "I've been so busy building barns and corrals, and this seemed large enough, for me. But we'll build on, as I promised, soon as we harvest a good crop from that hundred acres of plowed land out there!" His voice rang with enthusiasm and confidence when he spoke of the land, and his eyes begged her to understand.

"It will look very—cosy," she cried quickly, "once I get my china unpacked and some pictures up. And with a cushion or two about, it will be gay." Her heart warmed to Lane, and to the house, for it was part of him.

Sandy had biscuits waiting ready to slip into the oven, and bacon ready for the pan. Lane put them in and began at once to set the oilcloth-covered table with heavy granite cups and plates. He poured cream into a thick glass tumbler and set a worn old tomato can containing sugar beside it.

Tory removed her coat with fingers which shook from chill. Her limbs were weak with the peculiar weakness that follows hours of inaction on a hard wagon seat. The dusk had given way to complete darkness now and the window panes were black. In this small room they two were shut in with the lamp light and the stove and the bare board floor. But the kettle bubbled merrily on the stove. That sound, at least, was the same as it had been at home. Suddenly she craved tea.

Sandy came in bearing one of the great boxes of supplies from the wagon. He went back and got others. By the time all the groceries and the box of china and Tory's trunk had been brought in, the biscuits were a golden brown. Tory had not realized how hungry she was until she caught the crusty fragrance from the oven.

Lane seated Tory, but before he took his own place at the table he emptied a gunny sack which had been under Tory's feet in the wagon. Letters and papers spilled out. Lane counted the papers as he stooped to gather them up.

"Ten. That means you've had no mail for ten weeks."

Sandy nodded, inspecting a sheaf of letters for him. "A Frenchman from beyond the Dirt Hills brought the last mail around the last week in January."

Tory's eyes widened incredulously. Ten weeks without mail! No letters, no papers, no magazines? The full meaning of their isolation began to reach her.

The tea Sandy poured steamed, and as she sipped it she felt strength flow back into her body. In spite of the thick and chipped cups and plates, the bacon and the butter-fried

potatoes and superfine biscuits tasted more wonderful than any food she had ever eaten before!

Sandy and Lane kept up a fast exchange of news about the farm and winter events.

"Many new settlers going out beyond?" Lane demanded.

"Aye." Sandy buttered another biscuit. "Wagons have been going through to the Dirt Hills, and south to Big Muddy. Some Frenchies, and one or two Swedes. There was a Polack, too. And they say hundreds are coming over the Border fra the States, east of here."

"Implement dealers will get rich, the next few years," Lane commented. "But Laurier is doing a wonderful job of settling the prairie. People from Norway and Russia and Germany, from all corners of Europe, are coming into Canada on every boat! By the way," Lane asked drily, "who is the new homesteader up the trail?"

"Sime Prader." Sandy paused a moment before adding, "a right disagreeable character, too. I'm thinkit we'll leave him to himsel'. A young Swede has homesteaded the quarter south of the Stokes shack. Iverson, he's called. He's built a half dug-out shack on a slope there."

"But this Prader? Where's *he* from?" Lane persisted.

"Well, from the Ontario woods, originally, but—" and Sandy seemed reluctant to add the last words "he was in Regina the year before he came here."

There was a pause, and in it Tory caught a strange look between the two men, as if there were unsaid things in the room. A minute later she surprised Sandy's eyes upon her. He looked away quickly and at Lane. She gleaned the vague impression that he had things to say which she was not to hear.

"Enough newcomers arrive, and we'll have a railroad through this south country." Lane broke the short silence, then bent abruptly over the magazine he had been leafing through.

"Say, the Experimental Farms are nearly ready to distribute small amounts of a new wheat called Marquis. It ripens earlier than Red Fife, and cuts down frost risk. They predict it'll replace all other varieties within five years."

Sandy shook his head pessimistically. "It would take years tae grow enough to seed all the prairie."

"Experts claim it'll produce sixty bushels an acre! And it's rust free, too! Think of that for wet years! I'm going to apply for seed. We'll try it out."

Lane's Canadian accent, and the clipped precision with which he pronounced such words as "out" and "about" fascinated Tory. Though the accent was neither Scotch nor Irish, it had a faint flavor of both. Yet it had none of the slurred softness of English speech. Tory liked his voice, and she loved the confidence and certainty that were in his fast words now.

As the talk between the two men flowed on Tory felt she was hearing about the beginnings of a sweeping new age. She felt, too, that this man of hers, with his prodigal vitality and his boundless faith in the future of the land, would have his full share in the building and development of this great and waiting country.

Sandy was doubtful about the new wheat.

"I'm no expectin' miracles, even from the Canadian Government. Red Fife does right well on the prairie, come a season wi' enough moisture, and fall frost holding off—"

"That's the point," Lane declared triumphantly. "This new Marquis strain won't need favors from the weather!"

Supper was finished and Sandy filled his pipe. Leaving them to their discussion, Tory stepped out into the darkness. Now the sky was a black bowl full of sifted stars. The bigness of the invisible land was terrifying, and its primeval silence was as a roar in her ears, a roar louder than the real, noisy chatter of the rushing water at the bottom of the slope. Sounds blurred into the night. The dull stomp of a hoof, the

rub of hide against stall, a subdued snort. Those sounds had reassurance in the emptiness.

Tory walked away from the door. A blacker spot in the thick darkness was the crumbling ruins of an old sod shack. She had noticed it in her first swift survey of the yard, earlier. She paused before it now, attempting to sort reactions and conflicting impressions. Lane's shifting moods; his baffling pains and angers; his tenderness and exuberance; and the appealing loneliness and mysterious remoteness she had sensed in him from the first.

That loneliness of his had seemed to reach into some deep need of her own. But as she herself stood alone now, with the turbulence of the creek in her ears, doubts assailed her. The vastness of the land frightened her again.

Suddenly, across the creek, a coyote howled. It was a weird sound—between a bark and a maniacal laugh. It chilled Tory's blood and her pulse throbbed painfully. It made her think of violence and death. She ran toward the lighted window, behind which lay warmth and security.

But the sound of Sandy's voice, speaking on the other side of the door, stopped her hand at the latch.

"The lass hae a right tae know, lad. If she's going to live in the shadow of yon hill, she should be told, despite your ain hurt."

"That's all over and done with now." Lane's answer was swift, furious. His voice seemed to belong to another. There was a rasp of pain in it. "I won't have all that dug up again. I won't face it—hear it—see it—no—never! I cannot bear that. You'll not tell her, you hear? You'll help me, Sandy!" he ended with passion born of both anguish and sullen anger.

"Aye, aye, lad. If ye say no," Sandy agreed hastily. "But I think ye're eatin' your hear-rt awa' tae no use. A man's wife hae a right tae share in his troubles—"

"Troubles!" Lane cried harshly. "You can't know—just this is the torment of hell to me—just the memory awaken-

ed—just this talk! None of it can matter to Tory. I must, I *must* forget, not keep living it over—the hell of it—” His voice choked. Then: “It must be left to wither—to wear itself out.”

“Ah, weel, now—” Sandy soothed, “what’s done is done, lad. I’ll help ye try to put it out of the life of ye both. Ye’ve got a fine farm, and a bonnie bride. Ye’ll go on from here, then.” Sandy ended, and there was a certain finality in his words. After that, there was silence on the other side of that closed door.

Tory stood motionless, the darkness a weight upon her now. The stars mocked. The silence threatened. At last she found courage to lift the latch and enter. Inside, she had to hide her hands lest the trembling of her fingers be observed by Sandy or by Lane.

Sandy looked at her and she felt uncertainty in his gaze. Lane scowled by the table, that remote and agonized glare in his black eyes. She felt she should have demanded, “What is it I should know?” The impulse was there. But Lane turned his head and the naked pain and bitterness she saw in his face stilled her tongue. She yearned only to help him.

“Well, I’ll be gettin’ along.” Sandy rose with a show of exaggerated cheerfulness. His glance shuttled between the two of them, as a stubby finger tamped tobacco into his bent-stemmed pipe with slow and careful precision. “Shall I gie ye a hand wi’ the horses the morning, lad?”

“Come up for breakfast,” Lane urged, rousing quickly. “You’ll have nothing ready down there.”

Sandy looked at Tory.

“Please do come,” she insisted almost breathlessly, wanting only to be alone with Lane now, so that whatever it was that hung in the air could be cleared up once and for all.

But when Sandy went out, Lane went with him, setting out for a last inspection of the stables. As he stepped out into the shed, the light from the lantern he had lighted throwing

sharp shadows upward against his face, Tory caught a glimpse of his frozen lips. His troubled eyes seemed to be looking inward . . . deep . . . deep . . .

Unpacking the bags Sandy had carried in—how long ago it seemed now—she found herself trembling with eagerness for Lane's return, found herself, too, remembering one of their conversations in the first days on the boat.

Lane had painted for her so vivid a picture of the prairie that she had almost felt the sweep of its wind. It had given her an extraordinary feeling of fulfillment. Then he had demanded suddenly of her, "Why do you go to Canada?"

She had known, meeting his steady gaze, that he did not mean Harry. She had known at that moment, too, how unimportant her affection for Harry actually was. At the moment, nothing had seemed of any consequence except the need in Lane's dark eyes and the swift, bubbling joy in her heart.

"I—I think we all grope for something we do not know where—how to find," she had explained gravely. "Perhaps at heart we are all lonely souls, searching—" Her words had been a surprise even to herself. It had shocked her a trifle that she could say them to a man she scarcely knew. She had stopped in confusion.

"It might be a big search, in Canada," he had replied. "Canada is *big*. You might—only lose your soul there." She had thought she detected bitterness in his last words, and the shadow in his eyes both stirred and puzzled her. The moment became intense. Tory laughed lightly to break the gravity.

"How profound we sound! You haven't lost *your* soul, have you?"

"Sometimes I think I have." He leaned toward her suddenly. "Tory, forget this man in Winnipeg. Come to the prairie with me. The Captain will marry us before we land. I need you so desperately, darling." He held her close, pleading. "My one, my only hope."

In spite of the wild, tumultuous joy in her heart at the moment, she had known this man had depths and moods she did not understand. But she understood his dreams and ambitions for his prairie land; and love would make everything possible.

At the moment she had felt strong kinship with an impetuous Irish great-grandmother of whom the family had heartily disapproved. Marrying a man who was almost a total stranger, a man tumultuously different from the quiet, mild-mannered men she had always known, was precisely the kind of adventure Great-grandmother Conner would have sought!

That vigorous rebel against traditional English reserve had forced life to yield to *her*. She had known what she wanted from life and gone after it without delay. Widowed at twenty-six, left with five boisterous sons who had all possessed her own vigor and defiance, she had married again inside four months. There had been no puritanical reserve in her—

"My darling, I need you so," Lane whispered fiercely, insistently. "I want you so. And you want me! You know you do, Tory!"

And gladly, eagerly, that day only four days after she had first met Lane Jarvis, Victoria Sewell had given the promise which later, before a solemn ship's master, changed her into Tory Jarvis. She blessed the fate which made her take that boat on which Lane was returning from a winter of studying English horse breeding methods.

Now she was here in his lonely land with the man she had married. And as she unpacked her bags in the lonely, lamp-lighted room and waited for Lane to come back to her, she realized how very little she knew that man, how little he had told her about himself, how much she had taken on faith. Of his land and his horses, his country and its winds he had talked much. But of himself—she knew now he had said nothing of himself.

"On faith," she thought solemnly, "I agreed. I promised. A marriage of faith. And I shall hold to that faith—I shall—I shall!"

Tory finished unpacking her bag, and Lane had not come back. She waited, the minutes ticking away—thirty—forty—five—an hour—more than an hour and a half—

He came in smiling, as if he had been gone but five minutes. Tory sprang to her feet, ready to rush into his arms, to offer comfort and love. But he had turned his back, was blowing out the lantern, turning down the wick.

"You'll have to go to the barns in the morning, Tory—see all the horses, and the new filly. It is a sleek little beauty!"

Baffled, but not quite daunted, Tory looked directly at him.

"Lane, darling, what is it that troubles you? I wish you'd talk it out with me. We must have complete understanding."

The smile went out of his eyes and his shoulders jerked, as if painfully. Bleakness came over his face. Pain dulled his eyes.

"Let's not spoil tonight. Some day . . . You must trust me, Tory. What troubles me must cure itself. It feeds on talk. And until you know the prairie better—until you know me better—you could not understand—you could not help." He took her in his arms.

"Let love and faith be enough, Tory, for a time. Help me that much. I—I need your faith so much." There was humbleness and pleading in his voice. Tory yielded, as she always yielded to him. Now—love was enough. And faith—oh, yes!

But through the long night she lay sleepless, torturing herself with doubts and fears, while the age-old silence of the land outside lay like a weight against her ears. Long after Lane was asleep, her imagination built fearsome meanings into Sandy's pleas and into Lane's fierce and anguished

answers to those pleas. It was past dawn before she slept upon the mystery of Sentinel Hill and its long, broken shadows.

And before that, just as the first faint light came, from far down the reaches of the creek, Tory heard a lonely bird cry in mournful melancholy, "Alone—alone—"



Chapter 3. When Tory awoke a bar of solid sunlight thrust painful brilliance across the narrow room. For a moment she lay blinking at the raftered roof above, and at the bare uprights of the close walls. Then she saw Lane struggling with paper and shavings at the stove.

This morning he wore farm clothes: trousers of sturdy gray jean, and a black sateen shirt, jauntily unbuttoned at the throat. She lay watching the strong, brown column of his neck below the strongly cleft chin. His thick and glossy hair had that tousled disorder of a boy's just now, and it gave him an oddly defensive look that quickened Tory's heart to tenderness.

He struck a match down his thigh and leaned to touch the flame to the paper. He watched the slowly spreading fire with anxious preoccupation. At odd times Tory had seen a slight depression appear in Lane's right cheek. It showed now, like a dimple, except that there was no hint of a smile in his face at the moment.

Tory studied that little hollow rapturously and traced with acute pleasure the splendid lines of his body and the lean hardness of his jaw, as he stood there unconscious of her gaze. Her doubts of the night seemed suddenly trivial and of no consequence. And the small room began to look like home, with her garments flung about, and her cloak hung upon the wall.

Tory could feel the dazzling brilliance of the morning as a veritable assault upon the weathered shack. Rover, hear-

ing Lane stirring inside, yapped and yawned impatiently outside the door. The song of a meadowlark was flung across the yard with the scintillating sparkle of liquid silver. The soft roar of the torrent at the bottom of the coulee was magic on the clear air.

Happiness bubbled in Tory. Suddenly she wanted to feel Lane's arms about her, to feel his lips upon hers, and to bury her face against his brown throat. An eager and impish smile pulled at her lips. Stealthily she slipped out of bed, intent upon creeping near to fling herself suddenly into his arms.

Lane, with his back toward her, watched the slowly licking flame. Wood was scarce on the tree-less prairie. A small board was expensive, and a wooden box a treasure not easily acquired. So the lighting of a coal fire called for skill.

Suddenly white smoke eddied upward. The chimney draft caught it. The kindling crackled. The fire was going! With a sigh of satisfaction, Lane reached for the coal pail. The coal rattled harshly, one lump bounding aside. He snatched after it, and his fingers struck the already hot stovetop savagely.

His involuntary recoil dropped the scuttle, spilling coal over the floor. Unaware that Tory was directly behind him now, or, indeed, that she was awake at all, Lane snatched the burned finger in his other hand, and swore with thorough and heart-felt passion.

The blunt profanity was automatic, the natural reaction of a plainsman used to a man's world. Any plainswoman would have understood this. But Tory was not a plainswoman yet, and with the memory of Sime Prader's vile oaths still fresh in her ears, she recoiled now with a shocked gasp.

Her gasp brought Lane around with a quick smile, his anger instantly forgotten. He took a step toward her where she stood motionless, backed suddenly against the wall in

her voluminous muslin nightgown with its cascade of frills at neck and wrists.

She remembered afterwards that she did not actually move at all as he stepped toward her. But she did know she felt an inner shrinking. As surely as if her lips had cried the words aloud, her body and her hurt eyes cried, "Don't touch me!"

Lane's smile died. His head whipped back. For a heartbeat there was complete silence in the room, while outdoors there was the sudden and frightened shrilling of a gopher as Rover streaked in pursuit. There was the hasty rush of the creek water, and at the barn a cock crowed.

All in the space of a moment. Then with an effort Tory forced her lips to smile, seeking with panic-stricken speed to bring back to Lane's eyes the joy and the eagerness which had been there only an instant before.

But her smile could not ease the hurt. He straightened with sullen defiance.

"You'll have to get used to cussing, here on the prairie. Life gets violent, and you have to meet it that way, violent and fighting."

"But—but why *must* it get that way?" she demanded.

"Before you'd know the answer to that you'd have to fight for your life in a blizzard, or suffer with midsummer thirst. You have to feel the prairie's violence." He turned and jerked a chore coat from a hook.

Tory watched him thrust his long arms savagely into the sleeves of it, hoping to see relaxation of his tight lips. She had not meant to hurt him. She longed to throw herself into his arms and explain that. But it was not her nature, nor had it ever been easy for her, to explain what was in her heart. So she stood in silence as he jerked the coat on.

Only when his hand reached for the door did she move. She ran across the floor and caught desperately at his sleeve.

"It's all right. I didn't mean to hurt you. Give me time

to grow used to your way of life. If I understood everything, I could help—”

He paused, forcing a twisted, tormented smile. “I’m sorry, Tory,” he said, “give me time—time—”

Then he was gone.

Tory ran to the north window and saw him striding as though driven toward his barns. A door swallowed him into a sunless interior, and then the yard was as it had been. Chickens scratching in the soil industriously, a bird or two teetering on a fence wire.

A slow breeze was stirring to wakefulness under the mounting sun. Sunlight spilled over the yard and the ravine which cut back toward the creek, from behind the barns. Half way down the narrow draw a thicket made a smudge against the brown hillside. Everything had painful brilliance and clarity. Tory closed her eyes against the hurting vividness.

A sudden fury of sound and motion brought Tory’s eyes unhappily open as her gaze returned to the barn. Lane was leading forth a magnificent white-faced horse with tossing head and restless, pawing feet. This must be Pitch. Those sleek black sides and splendid, powerful legs had the gleam of obsidian, and the rippling muscles under that smooth hide had strength and power and beauty.

The stallion reared and snorted, but Lane held firmly to the bridle reins with one hand, while the other ran over the black withers in a lingering caress. Tory watched, her trouble fading. She was fascinated by the constant move of the animal’s perfect legs, and by the spirited toss of the beautiful, wedge-shaped head, as the horse twisted impatiently.

Watching horse and master, Tory found herself holding her breath. Lane’s tall, well knit figure, as he stood with head thrown back in exultant glee, while he rubbed that gleaming black coat, appeared to have the strength of rock.

But there was the same kind of power and arrogance in the Arabian stallion, too.

Suddenly Lane leaped to the stallion's short and powerful back. Pitch reared, pivoting, then sprang forward with a mighty lunge that carried him nearly twenty feet, and went plunging headlong down the slope. Lane settled back easily on the bare back, riding with the sure, muscular relaxation of the plains rider. Tory watched, marveling at his loose-limbed, graceful swaying as he rode the untamed black. There was her husband, her man. And she loved him, loved him! He should have time. She should have faith.

She ran across the room to peer from the south window. Lane looked back and, seeing her smiling face pressed against the pane, lifted his arm in salute. Then Pitch's white-stockinged legs plunged through the hip-deep water where the trail crossed the swirling creek.

Slowly the breath went out of Tory's throat and she could not tell if fear or relief gripped her. But she knew for certain, watching Lane and the powerful stallion disappear over a distant rise, that the Lane she loved exalted in the kind of battle he was having with the restless, untamed horse.

She was reminded of words Lane had said one day on the boat.

"Long, endless miles, with trails leading anywhere or nowhere, and lonely as the stars, sometimes. But a world of one's own. That's the eternal prairie."

The furious boiling of the kettle roused her to action. Dressing hastily, she began to prepare breakfast. She had no idea how long Lane would be gone, nor what he liked for his morning meal. However, Sandy would be along presently. She made oatmeal porridge, set the table, tidied the room a little as she worked.

She did not know how long it was before she heard hoofs coming up the slope. She ran to the door. Pitch was running

easily now, docile as a kitten. Lane waved at her, and reined the stallion close to the door.

The animal swerved sharply, passing so close to Tory that she felt the rush of air and smelled the warm odor of lathered horseflesh as they passed.

"Come out to the barn," Lane shouted in passing, "I'm going to turn the horses into the corrals. Stand round there." He indicated one side of the fenced enclosures.

She had scarcely reached the side of the five-strand fence when the ground shook under her feet as twenty horses fought their way through the double doors Lane had thrown open at the back of the barn. Crowding, squealing, nipping and kicking, the horses shouldered each other in violence as they wheeled and turned.

"Aren't they all beauties?" Lane, at her elbow now, demanded. "See those bronco mares? And the gelding, Buck? Broncs are bundles of nerves. Something in their spirit stirs a man's fighting blood."

Then a wiry, bright bay mare with a wobbly colt at her side came from the barn.

"That's Red Top and the new filly!" he cried. "The filly has Red Top's nerve and spirit. And Pitch's legs and mettle. Got just what I'm trying to breed, the grace and endurance of the Arabian, but the wiry spirit of the bronco."

The silky filly hovered timidly against its mother's side as the other horses circled the corral uneasily. A rangy gelding wheeled close, crowding the colt. It pressed against the mare, trembling.

"Hi, Socks, you—" Lane checked his tongue quickly, but the explosive power in his voice sent the gelding veering back along the fence and away.

"I've got to get separate pastures ready for the colts as soon as I can afford the wire," Lane worried. "They might get hurt, in with the horses."

Tory watched Red Top's nervously tossing head and the

quick-moving eyes which all too often in a bronco meant viciousness. But that nervous quickness was the thing Lane admired. He told Tory some of the reasons for his preference.

"No horses on earth are more self-reliant than broncos. They can travel days without food, and with only a little water. They can take care of themselves, even in winter. But they're small and not exactly beautiful, with their bony heads and thin necks. The Arabian is bigger, and it has beauty in its head. Look, you can tell it on the filly already."

The filly did, indeed, draw a cry of delight from Tory. It had a white face like the stallion, and around the eyes and the nostrils the skin had a blue-black tinge which was the unmistakable sign of Arabian blood. Under its downy fuzz the hair was the color of old gold. Later it would turn sorrel. As Tory leaned toward the fence the colt thrust up a muzzle soft as a sigh.

"What a baby," she exclaimed in delight. "Could I touch it?"

Lane shook his head, smiling slightly.

"You won't get very close for a few weeks. There are centuries of freedom behind those quick eyes. What *luck* that she has the right markings—white feet and face, and that black smudge around the eyes! We'll call her Luck," he decided suddenly.

"Lane's Luck," Tory agreed, smiling up at him.

"Lane's Luck," he repeated, "though it will be two or three years before I can be sure she has everything I want."

He turned now to point out to her various other horses.

"There's the team we drove yesterday, Ginger and Pat. That small mare is Star, and the brightest bay Twink."

Star and Twink, both heavy with foal, moved with caution among the other horses. Red Top hugged the fence corner, holding the colt hemmed out of danger. Resenting this, the colt nudged her petulantly.

"Little Luck," Tory murmured softly, suddenly sorry for the filly. It seemed a pity to tame the kind of freedom that ran in its wild blood. Tory stepped a bit closer to the fence.

The movement startled the mare. Snorting, she dashed away in fright, trying vainly to herd the colt along at her side. Bewildered and resisting, it was left alone and isolated a moment.

With a movement swift as light, the tiny head went down between its slender forefeet, and, kicking and twisting with all the violence of a rodeo outlaw, it dashed madly after Red Top.

The savage wildness of the colt's movements delighted Lane.

"God, what spirit," he cried in awe, bending to slip quickly between the close strands of the wire, then trying to edge toward the mare and colt.

Red Top knew Lane, but he had been away, and for the winter months she had roamed the snow-covered prairie without restraint. And she was at heart a wild horse. So as he edged up he watched her warily, knowing by the unblinking stare of her rolling eyes that she might not allow him to touch her colt.

He extended his hand and all but touched the small, inquisitive nose sniffing at him. For a second, while he stood tense and eager, and Tory held her breath, there was no movement at all in that end of the corral.

Then everything moved at once. Red Top shied violently. Five other broncos whirled suddenly into the melee. That corner of the fenced enclosure became a bedlam of flying hoofs and squealing heads. Lane was somewhere in the middle of it.

"Lane!" Tory cried out sharply, terrified by the flashing hoofs. She saw the colt beyond its mother lift small heels, kicking sharply. Then the whole mass of snaking

bodies and nipping heads brought up against the opposite fence, and Lane was walking toward her. He was rubbing his shoulder in a half dazed fashion, and swearing softly under his breath. The words were not profane at all, but a kind of crooning satisfaction.

"The damned spunky filly kicked me. It'll be a real battle to get that one tamed!" There was pride and elation in his voice.

Tory was beginning to understand that swearing was a completely unconscious thing to Lane, and that his easy oaths had none of the obscene intent that was behind the cursing of a man such as Sime Prader. She told herself she must learn not to mind too much.

She sensed already that Lane would be unchangeable, as the wild bronco spirit was unchangeable. The colt would have to yield and conform, to be altered to Lane's will. And Tory, knowing certainly that it was she who must make adjustments and changes, she who must adapt herself to life with Lane, felt swift kinship with the little colt.

Watching the spirited life eddying inside the corral, she knew that life on the prairie would not be easy. But she knew, too, that life without Lane would be forever incomplete for her. Life, she reflected half ruefully, was a strange tapestry of conflicts and compulsions. She hoped desperately that Lane had forgotten the incident of the early morning.



Chapter 4. Leaving Lane to finish the morning chores, Tory walked back toward the house. The sunshine had a solid quality that tricked her into believing she could grasp it. The rising wind passed her with a singing sound. The crystal-clear air was as stimulating as sparkling white wine.

Sandy came, and he and Lane talked of spring work and the country's future, as if the two were one. Perhaps they were. Tory listened and was inspired by her husband's confident voice and his great faith in the future of Canada.

His talk betrayed the stubborn and dogged qualities he had inherited from stout-hearted Loyalist ancestors. Those staunch pre-Revolution American colonists, having fierce pride in their British background, had migrated to Canada by the thousands rather than be disloyal to the Crown. Tory had already learned that the Jarvis family had contributed lawyers, judges, successful merchants and successful farmers to the development of Canada.

Watching the play of light and shadow on Lane's lean and vital face now, however, Tory understood that a man's background told one nothing of what lay behind his face or deep in his heart. One must learn, slowly, the complex being that formed a man.

Breakfast over, Lane left a pail of mash simmering on the stove while he explained the mysteries of the dank-smelling cellar to Tory. The bubbling mash gave off a pleasant odor.

"That smells—almost good." Tory wrinkled her nose.

"Shorts porridge *is* good. I wouldn't feed the horses any-

thing I wouldn't eat myself. We'll have some shorts for breakfast some morning."

"With a pile of hay on the side, I suppose?" Tory asked innocently.

He grinned as he lifted the trap door of the cellar. The place was little wider than the spread of Tory's outstretched arms. The steps were narrow and very steep. At the bottom a single plank crossed a damp dirt floor. Tory stepped gingerly. Lane was amused.

"Sure got myself a helpless wife," he teased. His eyes were merry, but Tory felt an invisible wall around him in spite of his amusement.

"I'm sure I'll learn quickly," she cried, her eyes begging admittance to the closed-off places in his heart.

But he was still impersonal and cool as they stood, later, considering the problem of storage for Tory's things in the small room above.

"First trip into Flatland, I'll get one or two big packing boxes and make cupboards for you. And after harvest we'll buy some real furniture, maybe build on a room."

"That would be splendid!" Tory cried. More living space would make life a little less primitive. But she was anxious to transform what she had with curtains and pictures.

Later, when the room was set to rights, she delved into the box which held the precious Belleek. She drew a plate out eagerly, held it against the light. The translucent china showed the clear outline of her outspread fingers behind it. The tea set was even lovelier than she had remembered!

She drew other pieces out swiftly; cups and saucers, plates, the sugar bowl, and the cream pitcher with its high lip. With the dishes spread on the floor about her, she reveled in the fluted beauty of each piece, and in the delicate coloring of the pale buttercup pattern against the creamy body of the exquisite china. But how alien the fragile dishes looked in the dark shack!

The teapot was the last piece to come from the box. Tory brought it up breathlessly, eager to gaze again at the beautiful urn-shaped pot. But when she saw it a great lump of disappointment came into her throat. An irregular triangle was broken out of one side near the bottom.

Tory gazed at the now useless pot and she was close to tears. She turned the pot slowly in her hands until the hole was turned away. There, if it were placed so, it was still a thing of beauty. It would look elegant on the packing box chest Lane had promised. But she would never pour tea from that slender spout.

She felt there was something symbolic about that broken piece. Her dreams, too, were not quite so perfect in realization as they had been in her heart. The pot would never hold tea, yet if her eyes could rest upon it now and then, it could be a reminder that there had once been dreams. Perhaps life could be made better than dreams! She placed the tea pot on top of her trunk, with a nice lace scarf under it.

Later, Lane regarded the fragile piece with amusement. He handled it with awe. At the dinner table he looked dismayed by the thin plates and cups and saucers.

"What was the matter with the old tomato tin?" he asked as she passed the lovely sugar bowl. "This looks too delicate for farm life."

"But it is—beautiful." Tory could not help the hesitation. She felt the explanation inadequate.

"After threshing, we'll send to Eaton's for a big set of *real* dishes. The country looks bare now, but in ten years, we'll all be rich from growing wheat." His confident glance went through the window to the plowed field.

Beyond his own fertile acres, down the slope and across the creek, an ox team moved before a walking plow. Tory saw the single black furrow lengthen across the land as the Swede, Jon Iverson, broke his first sod. Lane was watching that long furrow, too.

"In fifteen years, maybe sooner, every foot of this land will be farmed, and there'll be houses every way you look." His voice made Tory believe that it might be true.

That afternoon, humming softly to herself, Tory tackled the disorder in the shed. The narrow room with its single window at the far end smelled of coal dust and cobwebs. Pails hung from the ceiling. Unused garments lined the wall. A rusty iron bedstead leaned against the coal bin.

Some of the trousers and shirts hanging there needed only a few stitches to make them serviceable again. Tory laid those aside for future attention. Lane wore his work clothes with the same careless elegance with which he wore his best ones, and he liked them neat and well pressed.

She began to clear out a box of odds and ends. By the time she reached the bottom of the old boots, pieces of harness and odd socks, she was singing blithely. She reached for the last article, a bit of crumpled gingham.

As she shook out that scrap of blue and white checked cotton, her song broke off abruptly. The cloth was an apron, daintily patterned in cross stitch. From the pocket hung a sheer, lace-trimmed handkerchief.

Tory's fingers went numb. That handkerchief had belonged to a woman who appreciated beauty. Confused and puzzled, she tucked the handkerchief back into the pocket, rose and folded the apron on a chair beside the door. Lane could not fail to see it when he came in.

It was not long after that he burst in, eager to tell her of some new plan for the coming season. He did not see the apron at first. When he did, his voice died and his face took on the rigidity of chilled steel. He went out quickly, and Tory knew no more than she had known before. She wished passionately that she had persisted in her determination to gain information the night before, that she had overruled Lane's evasions and pleading.

After supper that night she walked away from the house

toward the edge of the slope. The low sun already threw a pool of shadow along the base of the bluff. Pausing beside the ruined sod shack, she surveyed the coulee, all the way from the closed, tight hills far north to the point where it was lost in a distant sedgy swamp in the south.

The view from the ruined soddy was better than that from the house. Tory visioned a house here, with wide windows set to catch the breath-taking vista of distance and creek. She walked a few yards down the slope, reveling in the cushioned feel of the springy sod, listening to the hush that hung under the chatter of the creek.

The land was untouched, lonely—empty as the pages of an unwritten book! A sudden thought arrested her. "This is *new* land. Few have set foot where I step now."

Contrasted to England's hard-trodden soil and the countless generations which had walked upon it, the thought of the utter newness of this soil staggered her. England could have few places which had never felt the press of human foot. But here on this short-grass land, where a faint wind sighed with curious expectancy now, *she* might be the very first white person to have stood on this particular spot!

The thought opened a startling vista . . . generations of Canadians to come . . . her children . . . her children's children . . . there was weighty responsibility in the thought.

She heard footsteps behind her. Lane was coming down the slope.

"Been looking at the old soddy?" he asked, but he was surveying the scene beyond, eyes glowing with the farmer's eternal eagerness for the rush of farm spring.

Tory felt serene now. She smiled back at him, then inspected the old ruined shack. Windows and doors were missing, but the foot-thick walls stood sturdily and the roof was whole.

"Did anyone actually live—in this?" she asked with interest.

"Sure. A cattle herder from near the Border built it. The

ranchers down that way used to run herds up here, a few years back."

Tory sighed lightly. "If lumber grew like sod, we could enlarge our house in no time, couldn't we?"

Lane shrugged easily. "A couple of good crops and we'll build a big new house. I'll get some breaking done yet this spring, plant it to flax. Flax brings good money these days. God, but I could use an extra hand around the place the next few weeks! Hope this will be one of those good seasons all farmers dream about."

"W—why wouldn't it be good?" Tory demanded in surprise.

He shrugged again. "It can get damn dry. Wind sucks up the moisture. That creek runs full now, but in a month there'll be only a string of waterholes along the bottom. Later, if it doesn't rain, there'll be water only in that big hole below the bluff. Some day I'll throw a dam across the creek, fix a year-round water supply."

A solitary bird sailed in a circle over the creek below them. Tory watched it swoop earthward with wings tilted stiffly and long legs trailing gracefully. It alighted and ran swiftly along the ground at the water's edge. Its wild and fading cry came clearly up the slope. It was the cry she had heard in the ehill, lonely dawn.

"What is that bird," she asked Lane in quick appreciation of the winged creature.

"Bird? Oh, that—kind of a curlew, I guess. At least some people call them that. But most prairie folks call them snipes."

The bird took wing again and soared away into the twilight. After they could no longer see it, its sharp and melancholy cry came back to them. To Tory it seemed again to say "Alone—alone—alone—" She caught her breath suddenly, thinking she had never heard anything quite so lonely as that cry. Surely the sound was the winged spirit of the prairie itself.

After the sound was gone, Tory stirred and looked at the

lonely shack across the creek at the foot of Sentinel. Lane's glance followed hers.

"S-say—after seeding perhaps I can move that shack up beside ours. Make a bedroom, or a summer kitchen, or something."

"Could it be moved?" Tory stepped closer to him, her heart beating hard.

"Sure. Easiest thing in the world, with a couple of good teams. Soon as seeding is finished, we'll see about putting it on skids and getting it over here." He stood before her, thumbs hooked into hip pockets, his wide shoulders relaxed and easy. For the moment his eyes were completely clear. He half smiled as he looked down at her.

"You're beautiful, Tory," he said softly, stepping closer to her. "My beautiful wife."

For a moment of magic it seemed to her the prairie, even the space and the emptiness, was beautiful. She lifted her hand and placed the tip of her finger tenderly in the deep cleft in his chin. It was a thing she loved to do.

"Lane, tell me . . ."

And so faith was forgotten.

The magic was gone. The sun had dropped half way behind the bluff. The broken shadows of the pickets leaped across the distance to fall upon them where they stood. For an instant, Tory had the impression that Lane's tall figure rocked as if from a blow. Before she could speak again he had turned and stumbled quickly across the fireguard toward the barns.



Chapter 5. April days are busy days for the wheat farmer. While the warming sun coaxes the frost from the ground, the farm implements must be made ready for the rush season ahead. Seeders must be oiled and checked, adjusted and repaired ready for the task of guiding the precious golden seed to its earth cradle. Disks and harrows should be checked also, and plowshares sharpened.

Lane was suddenly busier than the gophers which, overnight, became frighteningly numerous. He had seed wheat to clean of chaff and weed, and to treat with bluestone as protection against smut. Hand power was the power by which the noisy fanning mill was turned. It was a weary, dusty business, lasting days and days. Sandy gave Lane a hand, and Lane in turn helped Sandy.

The farm day began well before dawn now, and dawn itself came earlier and earlier. As Tory set about breakfast preparations by lamplight, she could hear Lane's blithe whistle at the barn as he curried horses quickly, measured feed and carried hay. Sometimes he sang lustily, and again his voice would be just a low croon. Tory did not have to be there to know, then, that he was gazing in admiration and pride at the new filly.

Horses were shedding their rough winter coats now. As days went by, sleek, glossy bodies of copper or bronze, of ebony or iron, emerged under the vigorous, patient combing. Pitch's splendid black body took on an added gleam.

Those spring days Lane kept watchful eyes upon Star and Twink, due to foal. For the mares themselves he was not con-

cerned. Bronco mares, he had explained to Tory, were amazingly self-reliant. However, the foals *might* prove to be precious beyond words. Or they might prove to be just two more awkward bronco colts, lacking the inherent ability and spirit Lane wished so passionately to breed.

And of course, in addition to the horses and the seeding and the preparation of the seed, there were harnesses to mend and oil, and the breaking plows to be readied. The moment the frost was out of the ground, it became a race to turn as much of the tough sod as possible. This year's breaking was next year's grain. If conditions were favorable it might be precious wheat, instead of the oats which were the usual first crop. And breaking completed by the tenth of June or thereabouts *could* become a profitable flax crop yet this season.

But under all the rush and the haste and hope and the dominating faith men had in this northern land, there was always a faint undertone of anxiety lest the brief growing season be too short for grain maturity; lest a late spring frost, or an early fall one, ruin the year's dreams in a single night.

So all of prairie spring was haste. The grain grew that way, once it thrust its hardy green shoots through the fertile soil. That swift upward shove became a race against the frosts of September. There might be frost in August. There had been killing frosts in July. But it was a gamble worth taking.

Tory planted a garden, and learned to cope with setting hens, and butter making. She learned, too, to bake the innumerable loaves of bread which working appetites demand. Sandy was unexpectedly helpful with that task. He taught her how to mix the bread sponge and wrap it closely against the night's sharp chill. He taught her, too, how to salt and mix the golden butter.

She liked the old Scotchman tremendously. There was something steady and constant in his gentle eyes, something restful in the contented lines of his face. When Lane asked

his countless, eager questions about the months of his absence from the farm, Sandy's smile was warm and indulgent.

"Was there a heavy snow?" was one of Lane's questions.

"Aye," Sandy nodded, cradling his old pipe in hard hands. "Dreefts so ye couldna see the hoose fra the bar-rn, until the black wind came in February."

"Black wind?" The phrase caught Tory's imagination.

"Chinook," Sandy explained. "It had been doon tae fifty below for a week, then one morn I waked tae a wind fair war-rm tae the face, a wind fra beyont the mountains west. It eats the snow doon to black earth in three, four days. Indians called it the black wind."

"Big snow, big crop," Lane declared with satisfaction.

"Dinna ye be tae confident, lad," Sandy warned. "Snow water runs off down the coulees. And if the wind keeps up, there's like tae be nae moisture left for wheat."

Days sped past, days of sunlight drenching the land in a life-giving tide; days when the wind rose from a breath at dawn to a joyful roar at noon. The wind always eased away again at evening, to become a muted melody which was background for the blazing sunset. No matter how clear the day, there was always a cloud bank waiting at sunset, waiting to catch and hold the day's glory over the land as long as twilight rested there.

Tory had been on the prairie two weeks that late afternoon when she and Lane finished plotting the garden between the house and the old sod shack. The frost, which here on the Canadian plains struck five or six feet into the earth each winter, was out of the ground at last.

Lane began to plow the fireguard again, and Tory walked behind the plow, drinking in the fruitful fragrance of the moist loam as she watched the thick black furrow fall into place, upside down exactly where the first furrow had been removed. The plow's precise simplicity fascinated her, and

she was keenly aware of the tremendous power that was in the fresh loam under her feet.

Head lifted as he walked behind the plow, Lane was singing. The ring of his voice gave to her a flashing vision of the land's future—fertile fields, prosperous buildings, pastures filled with spirited horses. Wistfully, Tory wished she had Lane's faith and confidence to carry her over the years between now and then.

Sandy was coming to supper tonight. Tory turned quickly, bent and picked a handful of the fuzzy, short-stemmed crocuses which bloomed everywhere, and went indoors. A wagon appeared on the north ridge. Tory gave it an incurious glance. It looked like any of the score of wagons which had passed along the trail in recent days, taking settlers out beyond the Dirt Hills.

She was cutting the last of the tough-skinned, sprouting potatoes into the kettle when the wagon stopped before the door. There were two people on the high spring seat. One was a bearded Frenchman, going to join the colony in the south country. The other was a well-dressed and striking young woman.

From the window, Tory saw Lane stop his team abruptly. The woman in the wagon waved at him.

"Lane! Hello, Lane! How good to see you again!"

Watching from the window, Tory did not miss the swift stiffening of her husband's body, nor the frozen wait before he returned the greeting. He stood motionless as a stone figure and it seemed to Tory that it was a long time before he spoke.

Then his words were chopped and curt.

"Fern—hello." He wrapped the reins slowly about a lever and came toward the wagon.

"Give me a hand, Lane." The young woman made ready to step out of the wagon. She looked down into Lane's face. Her own was bright with youth yet worn and sad in the sharp afternoon light. The sun glinted in her dark hair.

Almost unwillingly, it seemed to Tory, Lane extended his hand and the woman placed hers in it. She sprang down lightly. On the ground at his side, she turned to face him. She seemed to be almost as tall as Lane.

"Why have you come back?" he asked unsmilingly.

Before she could answer Tory stepped out of the shed. Lane turned.

"Tory—this is Fern Stokes." His voice was dull as he added, "Mrs. Stokes, Fern, this is my wife, Victoria."

Tory's stilted, conventional greeting to the gray-eyed newcomer was flat. She put out her hand, feeling small and inadequate before the tall, self-possessed, sad-faced girl. Tory sensed she was a widow. Lane had turned to speak to the driver of the wagon.

"Will you put up for the night? Glad to have you, you know." A little more life had crept into his voice. Western hospitality offered bed and board to every passerby. If the house was small, there was always the comfort of a bed in the loft, and that was adequate to men who had ridden jolting wagons over rough trails for hours.

But the driver shook his head. "I poosh on eight, ten mile. Sod, she's dry fas'. I got mine plow for break'." The Frenchman indicated a plow in the wagon. Fern's trunk was there.

Standing side by side behind him as he took down the trunk, the two women watched Lane's powerful shoulders and the sure swing of his body as he moved the trunk to the ground. The wagon moved on.

A silence wrapped about them. Tory felt questions breathing in the air, as she had felt them between Lane and Sandy that first night. Resentment flared in her, but out of the habit of polite upbringing she turned to Fern.

"Do come in. You must be very weary after the long ride."

"Thank you. I—" Fern flushed and hesitated, turning to Lane. "I—I had not heard you were married, Lane. It was late when I reached Flatland last night. No one told me. You

and Mrs. Jarvis won't mind if I move into the old shack for the summer, will you? I had to come back—" she made a half appealing gesture. "This is home—this land—here. I've no other home, you know."

"You may live there." Lane's voice was grim. "We'll do whatever we can for you, of course."

There was a strange mixture of violence and evasion in Lane's words. Tory's nails cut into her palms, hearing them. Then she saw Sandy coming, striding rapidly over the green-ing prairie. Before anyone spoke again he was there.

"Hello, Mrs. Stokes." He extended his hand to the girl at once, but Tory did not miss the quick glance he gave Lane and then herself. Did that glance have a question in it, or did it say to Lane, "I told ye so, lad"?

Still, the four of them could not stand here in the dooryard indefinitely, waiting for answers! Tory turned to Fern with an effort of hospitality.

"Do come in. These hungry men will be starving for their supper!"

"I'll finish the fireguard." Lane's tone was as remote as a cloud as he turned away. His broad shoulders seemed held with steel springs. Sandy followed him, and Tory led Fern indoors.

"I expect you're famished," she said quickly. Questions burned in her brain. She could like this soft-voiced Canadian woman, with her accent so like Lane's own, but for the doubts about her past with Lane.

Fern came to stand at Tory's elbow and stare at the fragile Belleek.

"How beautiful," she breathed, taking a plate reverently in her fingers. Her hands were large and strong, but shapely and well kept.

"Do—do you like them?" Tory asked quietly, meeting those steady gray eyes. How wonderful it would be to have a neighbor who liked the things she herself liked!

Their talk was of things, of trifles, not of life.

It was a relief when the men came to supper, Lane talking fast to Sandy.

"Fern is going to move into the shack across the creek. Guess we can fix her up with what she needs. There's that old bedstead in the shed there, and maybe you can knock together a table of some kind?" It was a question directed at Sandy, before Lane turned to Fern. He was more relaxed now, yet Tory felt a shield of reserve around him as he went on simply. "You'll need a horse, Fern. Take Socks and a saddle."

"Thank you," Fern was troubled. "But should I—"

"Oh, yes—indeed you should," Tory said, forcing the words.

Lane's relief was audible, in a sigh that was nearly a groan.

"I'll hammer up a table," Sandy said, quickly for him. "And there's an extra chair in my shack. We'll make ye comfortable, lass."

"You'll stay here tonight, Fern?" Lane asked after a long, strained silence at supper. "We can well take care of you."

She shook her head and tried to speak casually.

"Thank you, Lane, but I can't let myself be too much trouble to you. I have blankets and some food. Is the old stove still in the shack? I'll do well with it—home is what I want."

Lane nodded. "I'll take over what you need, then. Can you spare a loaf of bread, some butter and eggs, Tory?"

Later, he drove a wagon to the door, loaded the old bedstead. Fern drew on her coat, hesitated, looking at Tory.

"Aren't you coming, Tory?"

"I—I've got to set bread sponge. I really cannot spare the time." Tory spoke too quickly. She hoped Lane would insist upon her going when he came in for the food she had packed for Fern. But he seemed to take her feeble excuse at face value. Soon the wagon was rolling down the slope, bearing this new mystery on the prairie.

It seemed to Tory like a long time before Lane returned,

and it was still longer before he came to the house. She waited half impatiently, telling herself she would have the thing out with him this time.

But when he came in at last his eyes were wild with pain and his whole expression was closed, remote, like a mask made from another's face. Profound instinct warned Tory that now was not a time to talk to him, that now he needed to be left alone. She understood his need, or thought she did, as she sensed surely that Fern was no rival in love or in passion. Mrs. Stokes was some part of that past which Tory understood dimly was a sickness of Lane's soul. Some fever of experience that lingered on his mind must "wear itself out." He had told Sandy that talk made things worse. Like a fever that recurred, she imagined.

Aching with love for him, Tory told herself she would wait, offering understanding acceptance of the thing, whatever it was. She would even try to accept Fern Stokes on faith until it was time for all to be told. In her unquestioning, consoling quiet, Lane relaxed and slept. His tenderness in the morning was her reward, and her hope.



Chapter 6. May was a lovely month. The ever-lengthening days began with a stir like a soft yawn, as the sun warmed the night-cooled earth. Daily, as the sun mounted, the wind increased, until at noon it ran in strong gusts about the yard, returning with boisterous laughter at playful intervals to bang an open door.

Tory loved to watch the wind spread chords of light and sound and scuttling shadow down the silver-green, grassy slope. Rippling grass had the beauty of a fluted melody, with now and then a faint cessation of the theme, into which the trill of a lark, or the shrill whistle of a gopher, fell, as if the universe had paused just for that. There was an urgent power in the wind and the land.

There were other things about the prairie that Tory loved, too. In addition to the dew-drenched dawns and the colorful sunsets, there was the wonder of the dusk. A satisfaction too deep for words was in those soft, listening intervals, when the chill of the Arctic crept down from under the Big Dipper, hung high in the northern sky.

Wheat seeding was finished now, but the breaking must be rushed, before that constant wind sucked too much moisture from the deep, reluctant sod. Looking at the pale green of the hills, and the deep emerald which marked the course of the creek, Tory found it difficult to believe drought could ever come.

But day after day, as the sun beat down with blinding brilliance, moisture evaporated. Hour by hour the soil dried.

"If I could get a man somewhere, and run two outfits as long as the moisture holds!" Lane fretted. He had the horses and the implements, but each of the three men near, Sandy and Jon Iverson and Prader, had his own work to do.

A day or two later a stocky young Irishman stepped from a passing wagon to talk to Lane. Tim Shannon did not know what to do with his hands, and his red hair was always in disorder, but the smile on his freckled, angular face was warm.

"I thought I might take a homestead somewhere out south, here," he said wistfully to Lane, "though I don't know much about farming yet."

"There's plenty of good land here," Lane declared. "Tell you what, work for me for a month and take time to look the country over."

The arrangement suited Tim. Tory and Lane soon learned that the Irish lad had been an orphan most of his twenty-three years, and that although he had been working in a Winnipeg warehouse for months, his heart yearned for the soil.

By the end of the first week they called him "Swif" indulgently. Big Tim was pathetically willing but painfully slow. However, Tory liked having him around. He did for her odd tasks which Lane never seemed to get to, and he was grateful to be treated as one of themselves. When he looked about Tory's house moisture came into his eyes.

The room had changed since Tory's arrival. Curtains made from flour sacks embroidered brightly hung at the windows. Ruffles of gingham tacked to the edges of the open shelves gave the place a gay and airy look. Lane had got the packing box he promised and on top of it the useless teapot made a spot of beauty.

Tory's blanket-covered trunk made a cushioned seat under the north window. She did not need to open the trunk often. The tea cosies and innumerable doilies and scarfs it contained were quite useless here. At the very bottom of the trunk was a photograph in a silver frame. Sometimes Tory thought of

the picture and wondered a trifle wistfully if she would have found Harry hard to understand, too.

At first she used the Belleek every day. She could not enjoy tea from the chipped gray graniteware. But already one of the fragile cups from her set had slipped from Lane's nervous fingers, and a plate had been broken.

Lane had been boyishly contrite over the shattered cup. "Let me have my tea in one of those heavy mugs, Tory," he begged. "They hold more, anyway, and I haven't the patience to be careful with those dinky eggshells."

Tory could not but feel amused tenderness for him. They had not seen Fern again. Plainly Lane did not want to think of the girl. Day by day Tory felt more reassured.

Lane still fussed with the two mares which he kept confined in a separate corral. A dozen times a day he left his work to look at them. When Tory awoke one morning to find his place beside her empty, she knew what had happened. She dressed quickly, more than a little excited.

Lane came. He was haggard from lack of sleep, but his eyes glowed triumphantly.

"Both mares foaled. One filly, one colt."

Tory did not understand the distinction. "Were you there when—" He shook his head. "Bronc mares are shy about foaling. I waited around."

Tory asked about the foals, eagerly.

"Oh, good enough. But not like Luck. I guess one miracle is all I can expect in one year. I knew it would be a slow climb, getting exactly what I want. It might be two or three years before there's another as good as Luck."

The mares were in adjoining box stalls about fourteen feet square. Each stall had a wide door which opened out, though both were closed now. There was a small peephole near the top. Tory looked at Twink first. Her foal was already on its feet, though the long legs looked too slender to support the small body. The little thing staggered, bumping into the wall.

"Oh, won't it hurt itself?" Tory cried anxiously.

"They don't see well, just at first. But he won't injure himself."

Star's foal was a lighter brown. About the eyes and nose the skin under the silky hair had a faint suspicion of the blue-black skin which was so pronounced in Luck. Fascinated, Tory watched the small, active ears move with delicate grace above the blazed face.

"It has a good Arabian head, and fair legs," Lane announced. "Make a good plug, but—" he shook his head.

"Let's name them Cinnamon and Cloves," Tory suggested.

"A spicy team." Lane grinned, stepping in beside the mare. The other thrust her head over the dividing partition to nip his shoulder jealously. Laughing, he turned and caressed her plushy nose.

The men were still spending long hours in the field when June came on with an unbroken spell of heat. Not a sprinkle of rain had fallen and the earth was powder dry. The brief spring green faded from the hills. The wind moved over the drying grass with a monotonous swish that was like a constant hiss.

The heat and the dryness of everything had grown almost intolerable to Tory the day Fern Stokes came to call upon her. The tall girl rode up the slope on the horse Lane had loaned her. She rode extremely well, but Tory disapproved of a lady wearing overalls, and riding astride.

"Hello," Fern waved from the trail as Rover's quick bark brought Tory to the door. The horse cut across the yard at a quick gallop and Fern was on the ground before he had completely stopped. "Oh, but isn't it hot?" she asked.

"How do you do, Fern," Tory replied primly. "Won't you come in?"

Fern blew an errant curl from her damp forehead.

"Only the thought of how good tea would taste from one of your nice cups, brought me out in this heat." She caught Tory's glance at her overalls. "I suppose I should have changed," she apologized hastily, "but I was working in the garden, and pants are so much easier to work in, out in the wind."

"Never mind, do come in," Tory stepped back with pleasant but cool politeness.

Fern did not at once follow, so Tory looked out again. Fern was staring directly across the coulee, and toward the top of Sentinel.

It was a sudden impulse which moved Tory to ask, quickly, urgently, "Who lies up here?"

Fern was startled, incredulous. "Oh, Tory—you—don't know?"

"I do not know," Tory said emphatically. "And I was only asking. Don't think I am pressing you to tell."

Fern faced her squarely.

"I can't tell you anything Lane would hold to himself."

"You—you've lived *here*, in this house, haven't you? Will you answer that?"

They faced each other, Fern waiting gravely, composedly, for Tory to say more. But Tory could not bring herself to force the issue. At last, with a shrug of her shoulders, and a gentle "Thank you, Tory, goodbye," Fern turned and gathered up the reins she had dropped a few moments before. The horse lifted its head from the grass of the yard, where it had been cropping quietly. Fern turned back.

"If you ever want me or need me, Tory," she said evenly, "I'll come, of course. For anything. Just let me know. Except—your husband—is yours—and what you have to know of him must be from him. I'll leave you alone if you like, too. And all with good will . . ."



Chapter 7. The heat held, and the creek became just a succession of scanty waterholes, as Lane had predicted it would. The tepid, brown water was thick with live wrigglers which had to be strained out before one could take a drink. Tory could not drink it at all. Just to look at it brought the loud croaking of frogs into her ears.

The wheat stopped stretching upward. The green tips paled and whitened. Dust blew along the trails and along the edges of the field. Breaking plows were put away. The sod was too tough to turn. Everyone hoped achingly for a soaking rain to ease the drought. Lane grew increasingly irritable.

Tory knew she was in some measure responsible for that irritation. Try as she would, after Fern's visit and their quarrel that day, she could not act like herself with Lane. She held him away, brooding to herself, growing, day by day, lonelier and more lonely.

Sometimes she saw Prader's wife crossing the distant yard, looking pitifully small against the vast backdrop of ridge and sky. She promised herself that some day, in spite of Sime's warning last spring, she would call upon the girl. As the days passed, she hesitated, deciding upon the next day and the next.

Prader, no longer at work on the land, rode his rangy bay up and down the trail, a rifle slung across the saddle before him. The sharp report of the gun as he shot gophers rang out at very frequent intervals.

However, it was not the unexpected shots which Tory came to dread, but the inevitable aftermath. As the gun went off,

the bay always shied violently, bucking in fright. And *always* Sime jerked and wrenched the reins until the cruel curb-bit forced the animal to stand motionless. Sime was satisfied with nothing less than utter immobility. If a single muscle moved in the taut brown body under him, the battle began over again.

Sime delighted in staging these scenes directly before Tory's window if he could. Time after time she saw the flinching bay brought to helpless submission. Sometimes the horse was so close that she could see its rolling eyes.

At such times Sime had an unpleasant way of sweeping yard and slope with peering eyes, and a slow but ugly grin would spread upon his evil features. That grin made Tory writhe, and it made her hate Fern Stokes. Fern and the lonely prairie were both her enemies. If she could only talk to someone who would understand.

She did try talking to Sandy.

"Why has Fern come back here? And where's her husband? Or did she have a husband?" Tory could not keep the sharpness out of her voice.

"She had," Sandy agreed slowly. "He—well, he never rightly lived here."

"Not live here?" Tory had not thought of that.

"He left Fern tae do the homestead duties, and went tae wor-rk on a Border ranch."

"A—a cowboy?" The word conjured for Tory a picture of wild herds and danger.

Sandy knocked the ashes from his pipe, smiling faintly.

"Well, in a way I guess he was. You're wonderin' what happened tae him, I suppose. He—died in an accident."

"Accidents happen on ranches, don't they?"

"Aye, accidents can happen—anywhere." He paused, sat looking quietly across the prairie. His voice was low, when he spoke again.

"Ye must hae patience wi' Lane, lass. He's worrit greatly

wi' the drought. When crops fail the farr-mer maun wait a twelvemonth for anither."

"Isn't he worried over anything else?" she persisted.

It was early evening and down along the farther reaches of the swamp a mirage spread swift and strange beauty. Sandy indicated the mirage with the stem of his pipe.

"See that, lass? Looks real enoo for the minute, think ye? But look, it's fadin' a'ready. So will this in his mind, if we but bear wi' it. Have faith in him, lass. I canna say more than that, till Lane does. He will speak. Aye, he will."

One day while Tory was feeding a flock of new chicks, a scarlet-coated rider came down the trail. Lane, working not far from Tory, looked up with interest.

"It's the Mountry making his patrol. He'll stop for dinner, likely." He spoke casually enough, but when the rider reached the yard, Lane advanced with a reluctance Tory had not seen in him before.

"Dinner in half an hour, sir. New to this patrol?" He scanned the well-kept mount approvingly and shook hands with the man.

"My wife, Mrs. Jarvis," Lane turned to introduce Tory.

The Mountry smiled. "I'm Ray Harrison. Jarvis, eh?"

"Right! Lane Jarvis. I'll sign your patrol sheet after dinner. Good weather for patrol riding," he added.

"Very good," the man agreed, loosening the girths. "It makes my patrol duties a pleasure." He stood as tall and erect as Lane. The bright coat and the navy trousers with their inch-wide yellow stripe down the seams became him. The mirror-like polish of his high leather boots reflected the sun. He removed his Stetson and smiled at them.

"Any pressing problems at the moment?" Lane inquired.

Harrison shook his head. "Our aim, you know, is to protect rather than detect; to prevent rather than punish." The stilted phrases were a direct quote.

"And to get your man, when prevention has failed," Lane

added with a smile. Canadians were proud of the record of their Mounted Law.

"Gophers seem plentiful this year," Harrison was eager to talk after his solitary ride. "There is rumor of paying a bounty for the tails."

"Well, a bounty would provide anyone interested with a steady income," Lane replied.

"I'm doing my bit," Tory made a wry face. "I keep traps set all the time. 'Twill take a long time to kill off a million gophers, though, six or eight a day."

Gopher trapping was altogether distasteful to Tory. Lane had taught her how to set the small steel traps, and how to place them in the runs with a sifting of sand over the springs. That was easy enough. The hard part came after the rodent had been caught. Rover helped, but it made Tory ill to hear their final squeals.

"What's the news from Ottawa?" Lane was demanding eagerly as she walked indoors to prepare dinner. "We haven't had a paper for a month. Any talk of a railroad for this south country?"

They were still discussing the railway at the dinner table.

"There isn't enough settlement to warrant the expense of a railway out here yet," Harrison argued. "Homesteaders are still miles apart!"

"Well, it will be a long time before settlement is very thick," Lane replied. "After all, in every township of thirty-six sections only sixteen and one quarter sections are open for homestead entry."

There was a fact which had puzzled Tory.

"What is all the rest of the land for?"

"A matter of payment for favors received," her husband explained with a shrug. "The Canadian Pacific and other railways were paid over thirty million acres of prairie land for completing the transcontinental line."

"Thirty million acres!" Tory was aghast at the figure.

“They earned every acre!” Lane insisted quickly. “The whole West was worthless, without freight lines to carry away the wheat it can produce. And considering the years they’ll have to wait before they will make even interest on the investment, the payment was not at all large. There will be taxes. And they sell their holdings cheap enough. I bought my land from the railway.”

Tory understood the emptiness beyond her windows a little better for knowing that it was in reality marked off with neat purpose, into townships six miles square, each divided into thirty-six sections of six hundred and forty acres, the sections divided again into four quarters, one hundred and sixty acres to a quarter.

“You know I never understood the rights of that railway deal.” Harrison looked at Lane. “You make it sound better than the great land steal many Canadians think it was.”

“People forget,” Lane went on earnestly, “that there was no timber here to haul off at a profit. Any possible profit will have to come out of freight which is hauled from the land itself. But it will repay the railways in time. Settlers are pouring in by the thousands every year.” His voice rang with the sure confidence Tory always thrilled to hear.

Big Jon Iverson spoke English with the careful precision of a foreigner taught the language in the schools of another land. Tory liked the shy Swede. During the spring he had walked up to the Jarvis farm frequently, but as weeks passed his visits grew farther apart. Some of his evenings, Tory suspected, were spent with Fern.

Lane had little time for sitting idle, those summer days. Field work was done for the present, but there was the haying to attend to, and always something to do for the horses. But one evening Sandy and Jon both were there, and Lane took time to relax, leaning back against the wall, his long legs stretched out over the wide stepping stones before the door.

Big Jon had a slow, dry wit. He amused them all. Tory was warmed, hearing Lane's quick and deep laugh in the twilight. The interval was one of the more satisfactory times of prairie life. In spite of the droning mosquitoes it was pleasant to hear faint, far-away sounds of earth and grass, to see pale stars appear, to feel the damp chill of falling dew.

The smoke from Sandy's pipe helped to keep the insects from his face. Lane slapped viciously at his neck.

"We ought to build a smoke smudge," he remarked. Sandy smiled.

"They like the taste of fretful meat, lad. Me, they seldom nip. The morrow, I'm going tae walk up the creek seekin' likely hay. And nane will nip at me the day."

With a sharp bark Rover leaped away, baying into the darkness in the direction of Sentinel. They all listened, hearing nothing beyond the usual night sounds—the intermittent croak of frogs, the faint cheep of a night bird, the steady, primitive sound of tearing grass as a horse cropped dew-drenched feed down near the creek.

In the darkness Tory felt acutely the threatening bulk of the bluff. As if her thought had conjured the sound, a coyote's cry, wild and sharp, came from the hill. She moved closer to Lane, wondering if she would ever have the courage to climb that lonely hill.

"'Tis a lonely spot, yon hill," Sandy said, corroborating her thoughts.

Big Jon turned to Lane.

"Was there not some trouble over horse stealing, down by the Border last year? Aren't you afraid to leave your horses roaming the prairie at night?"

Lane sprang up. "What reminded you of horse stealing just now?"

Jon blinked at Lane's anger. "Why—I—it would be easy for a thief to run good horses away. Darkness, space—" His careful English faltered uncertainly.

"What have you heard? Who have you talked to?" Lane persisted belligerently.

"I have heard nothing, nothing." Jon rose, stiffly polite, ready to take his leave. Tory rose, too, stunned by Lane's rudeness and unaccountable anger.

"Jon, I'll strain off a pail of milk for you," she said quickly. "Wait!" She turned hastily into the shed and snatched down a clean jam pail from a nail.

It was not until Jon had gone swinging into the darkness with the small pail, and Sandy, too, had taken his leave, that Tory spoke to Lane.

"Why must you fly into rages about nothing? There was horse-stealing last summer. Swif heard about it from a man who came through from Willow Bunch. Is it a crime to mention it?"

"It's death to me." Lane was stonily defensive against her anger. "That's how it struck me. If I could only forget . . . forget . . ."

Puzzling the thing out during the sleepless night, Tory knew that on the morrow she *would* walk to the summit of the ugly bluff. Heat or no heat, she would see if any answer to the riddle lay there.

It was afternoon before she set out, angling down the long slope toward the base of the hill. Near the dry creek bed, tangled buckbrush and wild rose grew in an almost impenetrable hedge which overhung the mud which had been the water.

The wind tossed the bushes with noisy violence. It moaned and hissed among them, then came back to snatch at Tory's skirts. Something moved in the grass. With a sharp cry of fear she ran panting up the opposite bank.

The vastness and the loneliness of the prairie still terrified her. It looked even lonelier, more vast, from here than it did from the safety of her yard. She stopped, trembling, just at the bottom of the steep side of Sentinel.

At that moment Sandy appeared around the shoulder of a knoll, returning from his walk in search of hay. She gasped with relief. He waved and she waved back, frantically, while the wind fought her. It was hot and strong and wilful. It whipped her hair and tore at her skirts. It burned her face with unmerciful violence.

"Ready to go home noo, lass?" Sandy came up to her and took her arm with a certain decision, adding, "It's right hot today."

"I'm going to climb the hill," she answered breathlessly. "I've wondered ever since I came what lay inside that fence. I'm going up to find out." She tried to keep her voice light but the wind defeated her.

"'Tis a stiff climb, and that steep side will be alive wi' snakes this hot day," Sandy warned.

"B—but Lane says the prairie snakes are harmless."

"Aye, quite harmless. But they gie one a star-rt, when they slide away silent like. Shall we walk along to the crossing together?" He had her arm firmly.

Tory stood irresolute. The bushes by the dry creek moved furiously again with a roaring sound. The wind swept on and far down the coulee Tory saw it pass as the wild rose thickets bent and swirled. The wind was like giant, powerful waves. If she did not move she would drown. But she had set out to climb Sentinel.

She half drew her arm out of Sandy's, and just then a bright garter snake slid across a nearby stone. She gulped down a sob of fright and the resistance went out of her body. She moved along with Sandy.

"Why would they bury anyone up there?" she cried half hysterically. "It is so lonely!"

"Aye. But wi' all these new settlers coming, the loneliness will pass. Now when we get a railway and a town close by, things will look up. Think of a town, with a chur-rich mebbe, and—"

It was not until she was at home again, exhausted from the walk in the heat and the wind, and Sandy had gone on toward his own roof, that she realized she had never heard the old Scot talk so volubly and so continuously before. And with all his talk she had learned exactly nothing.



Chapter 8. By mid-July the solitude and the heat had become a horror to Tory. By that time, too, even Lane had ceased hoping for rain. Not that rain could help much now. The stunted wheat bleached under the blasting wind. Oat grains shriveled on the stalk. Wild hay dried on the stem. Swif and Lane worked desperately in the heat, however, cutting and stacking the lifeless stuff for winter feed.

"Prairie wool," Swif called the short, dusty grass.

Tory watched them work. The trailing untidiness of the loads, with wisps of hay trailing and dropping across the yard, irked her almost unbearably. So did the slow, burdened creak of the rack as it was drawn or backed into position beside the growing stacks.

Each time a load came in, Tory took water or cold tea to the men. Lane worked bare-headed, his glistening dark hair ruffling in the wind. Daily the lines in his face tautened, the harassed desperation in his eyes became more apparent. But day after day the loads came in, and the stacks behind the barns grew—as Lane's tall, powerful figure stooped and pitched, and Swif's slighter, more wiry body kept pace, forking the hay into stacks which would shed rain and withstand winter gales.

Day by day Tory's nerves drew more taut, too. The dreadful, monotonous sameness of the days appalled her. If there were somewhere to go—something to do beyond the routine of cooking and baking, gardening and chicken feeding! She grew to dislike heartily the warm smell of the new milk Swif

brought in each evening. And the sight of bright yellow butter melting on a plate came to be almost more than she could bear.

The problem of water, too, was growing acute. Lane had a shallow well at the edge of the slope. It supplied just enough seepage water for cooking and drinking use. For all other purposes the creek water served. And except for the big waterhole, the creek had long been completely dry.

How long the waterhole would last became a desperate anxiety. To that lone hole Big Jon drove his oxen every day; Sandy led his teams, and Prader drove his. Lane's spirited horses were herded down the bare slope twice daily. The two cows made their slow trek down the bare hillside each morning and each evening. For the three pigs Lane was raising for winter pork, Swif hauled water in a barrel.

"If the hole dries and we have no showers, we'll have to haul water from Dry Lake, ten miles away." Lane watched the shrinking hole daily.

Some days clouds did appear in the sky, far to the southwest. Somewhere out in the south country showers were falling. But no rain fell on Jarvis Prairie. Lane plowed the fireguards again.

Tory watched the horses labor in the dry heat, saw the fine dust rise to settle on Lane's face and shoulders. His skin was burned now to the color of tanned leather.

"Why bother with fireguards?" Tory asked irritably, scanning the shoulder of the coulee where grazing stock had cropped all grass to the roots. To her eyes there appeared to be nothing left on that sod to burn.

"You've never seen a prairie fire," Lane replied grimly. "These hot winds can drive a fire twenty miles while a man plows a single furrow. And if we don't get rain soon there's going to be feed shortage this winter. Horses and cattle will starve."

One day a wagon appeared on the long rise to the north. It was a settler on his way from Flatland to the Dirt Hills. Tory felt absurdly excited as the wagon stopped in their yard. The man was a complete stranger, but it had been weeks since they had seen anyone from beyond the ridge. It had, indeed, been weeks since they had had mail, or news of any kind.

The man greeted them with a hail-fellow-well-met shout as he drew up his team.

"This must be the Jarvis farm." He glanced from Lane, who had advanced to the wagon, to the sprawling corrals behind the barns and the numerous horses which ambled listlessly on the bare slopes. "Postmaster told me I'd know the place by the horses. He said I was to tell you there's going to be a picnic at Zellman's Grove tomorrow. He thought you might like to take your Missus."

Picnic? Tory felt her heart skip a beat. A picnic meant people, gaiety!

"What's the occasion for the picnic?" Lane inquired.

"Sunday schools of the town. Naturally they want as many people to come as possible. Guess you would have heard of it before, if you had been to town."

"We'll go, of course," Lane announced after the stranger had driven on. "Swif, ride over and tell Fern, and Jon, and Sandy. We may as well all go together in the democrat.* It is twenty miles to Zellman's Grove."

Excitement and anticipation throbbed in Tory as Lane helped her plan what to take. Canadian picnic food, she learned, was much heartier than the handful of sandwiches or the bun or two which sufficed in England.

It was midnight by the time the cake she made was iced and ready, and the three dozen hard boiled eggs had been taken from the deep red beet juice and stuffed. The time did not matter to Tory. She was tired but felt too excited to sleep.

* a two seated spring wagon

They rose at four the next morning. The cows protested noisily at being driven to water so early. The horses delayed their start by taking a dashing sally up the steep side of Sentinel, after they had drunk their fill at the waterhole. Even Rover, yapping after them, and continuing to bark excitedly after the stock had all been returned to grazing ground, seemed to feel something untoward in the air.

The sun was hot as they set out, but a stiff breeze was blowing. That kept the annoyance of mosquitoes to a minimum. Tory would not have noticed any annoyance today. Each mile of the long trail was a pleasure, after they turned from the Flatland road.

"How much farther is it?" she kept demanding.

"I'll point out the Grove, soon as we sight it," Lane promised. Fern, sitting in the back seat with Sandy and Jon, pointed out things to Tory.

"There is a bed of wild strawberries in that coulee"—and much later, "Saskatoons are plentiful for a mile down that ravine."

"There's the Grove." It was Sandy who sighted it first. Tory looked at the faint smudge far ahead. Trees! Trees!

It was exciting to stand under the stunted trees, after they had placed their baskets on the long board tables. It was exciting to meet people, some of whom lived twenty, even forty miles beyond the Grove!

"Oh, Mrs. Grover—" Fern knew many of the women. "This is Mrs. Jarvis. And Mrs. Snapp. Do you know Mrs. Jarvis, Mrs. Snapp?"

"Mrs. Jarvis?" Mrs. Snapp blinked and looked searchingly at Tory and back to Fern. There was an awkward pause. Then the woman seemed to remember herself, and added heartily, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Jarvis. Pleased to meet you."

In the bustle of setting out the food Tory met several women. Fern introduced her to those she knew. Both met others. There was talk, chatter, laughter, and children racing

and shouting everywhere. Laughter—gaiety—companionship—that was what the picnic meant to Tory.

The abundance and the variety of the food on the tables astounded her. Platters of fried chicken, heaps of sliced ham. Potato salad and lettuce salad. Pickled string beans. Those were a wonder to Tory, until someone passed pickled carrots!

But it was the cakes which made the greatest showing! Every woman at the picnic had brought a cake. There were round cakes and square cakes, cakes baked in loaves and cakes baked in flat drippers. There was one high cocoanut cake intricately cut in the pattern of a star.

Tory exclaimed over it. "How clever! Who did that?"

It was Mrs. Snapp's cake. "It's easy," Mrs. Snapp shrugged carelessly. "Just cut it first like five pieces of pie, then make a point in the edge of each piece—like this—" she demonstrated on Tory's cake.

Mrs. Snapp was very friendly. She admired Tory's lace trimmed frock with sincerity, but Tory felt there was thinly veiled curiosity in the portly woman's frequent glances, as the hours passed.

The day had been completely satisfying, Tory thought, as she and Fern sorted knives and forks and packed up their dishes when it was time to go home. Fern had done a great deal to make her day happy.

"Wait here by the table, Tory," Fern said gently when the boxes were packed. "I'll carry mine down to the rig, and see if I can find Swif to come for yours."

Tory's box was, in fact, much larger than Fern's. There was no necessity for her to carry it, but she could have walked along with Fern to the rigs clustered some distance from the shaded tables. The horses, of course, had been unhitched upon arrival. Tied to wheels or trees, they munched upon the hay which had been brought for them by most of the picnickers.

There was a tree behind the long plank where Tory sat.

She leaned her shoulders against it and watched two small girls in now-soiled white dresses talking to two self-conscious boys in chambray suits, as Fern lifted her box and walked away.

The crowd was breaking up now. Buggies and wagons drove out of the Grove in all directions. Farewells were being said on all sides. Tory realized vaguely that she would probably not see any of these people for another year.

Men stood about in groups under the trees near the bunched rigs. As Fern walked along erectly, apparently unaware of the weight of the box she carried, Lane came from a group and took it from her hands. The two walked side by side to the two-seated rig, where he stowed the box under the seat.

Tory, leaning idly against the tree behind her as she sat on the hard plank which ran the length of one side of the table, became aware of women chattering in subdued voices somewhere beyond the tree at her back.

"Look," a hushed but insistent voice was confiding eagerly to someone, "there's Jarvis and that woman, talking together over by his rig."

"Well—" That positive, self-righteous voice belonged to stout Mrs. Snapp. "I guess if the truth were known, there was a lot more to that affair last year than appeared to the eye—or the law either," she amended significantly.

"Where there was so much smoke," the other agreed emphatically, "there was bound to be some fire."

"I wonder how Mrs. Jarvis feels about living near the woman, riding to the picnic with her—"

Numbed by currents of doubt and mystery, Tory had sat rigid up to that point. But the pity of these women she could not stand. She rose quickly, turned to face the gossipers.

"Mrs. Snapp," she said calmly, "you don't understand how things were. I know things you do not know, yet. When you know all the facts, you'll—"

She was not aware that Fern had returned until she felt a

hand upon her arm. "Oh—shall we walk round a bit, Fern, while the men hitch up?" She wished she felt as serene and friendly as she tried to appear.

"Why, certainly," Fern agreed at once, though Tory had earlier declined to walk about the grounds with her. They moved off together, Tory trying to make her chatter sound animated and genuine for the benefit of Mrs. Snapp and her friend, now standing in discomfiture where Tory had confronted them.

The team danced restlessly while they all took their places in the democrat ready for departure. As the wheels spun and they moved out of the Grove and onto the dusty trail, Tory lapsed into a silence no one seemed to notice particularly.

It was a long ride home. The wind died as the sun sank, and mosquitoes swarmed in dark clouds above their heads. Occasionally Sandy spoke, but mostly the voices in the back seat were Fern's and Jon's, with Fern's laughter coming quick and often, so unusual for her.

Once Lane glanced sidewise at Tory, as if wondering at her silence. After that he rode unsmiling. Gophers raced and whistled on all sides with an unusual amount of activity.

"Gophers seem thicker than the grass," Swif remarked.

"I think we should make poison grain and spread over all of Jarvis Prairie," Jon announced positively. "What you think, Lane?"

"No! No!" Lane shouted in a sudden outburst of violence. "No poison grain will ever be spread on my land!"

"But poison wheat kill a hundred gophers this year—same as—thousands next." Jon was apologetic but persistent.

"Not one poisoned grain on my land!" Lane cried with an amazing fury. "Not a single grain! And remember, the land where Fern lives is mine! Not a grain, ever!"

Tory groped for the cause of Lane's surprising anger. Could it be because Jon was quite obviously courting Fern? She tried to push the thought away, but it kept coming back

with annoying and disturbing frequency and continued to prod her, despite all her resolutions, for many a day afterwards.

After that picnic, the loneliness seemed even harder to bear than it had been before. Sometimes she looked toward Prader's squalid, half-finished shack, toying with the idea of defying Sime. Yet the man had made it disagreeably clear to them all that he wanted nothing to do with neighbors.

So the only thing left for Tory was to find as cool a spot as she could, and try to ease her loneliness with the mail order catalog. Turning the pages of the Eaton dream book was as stimulating as a city shopping tour—at first. It passed the time to weigh the merits of a frock, mentally to place a new dresser in her small room, or to decide which of her frocks the new brooch would brighten.

But when she began seeing the pages in her sleep because she knew them all by heart, it was no longer fun. She stood on the doorstep again, looking toward Prader's, weighing Sime's ugliness against her need for a woman to talk to.

Swif and Lane were digging post holes for a new corral the day she mustered courage enough to set out along the dusty trail, where mounds of fresh-dug earth from gopher holes dried rapidly under the blazing heat of the sun. There was no wind today and heat waves danced along the horizons. In the coulee the horses stood motionless. Such grass as remained was not worth the trouble of cropping.

Tory's back burned through her dress. She scanned the Prader yard. Sime was nowhere in evidence yet. The bundles of shingles still waited in a heap. A pen near the shed confined two complaining sows. There was the glisten of water oozing slowly from between the drying staves of an almost empty barrel.

A dog barked sharply. Prader's wife appeared at the door.

She moved awkwardly, with the slow heaviness of coming motherhood. Tory stared in shocked surprise. The girl looked so young, not more than seventeen.

Tory saw Sime then. He stood behind the shed, a long whip in his hand. The bay was tied there to the wagon. As Tory came into sight, he lifted the whip. It fell upon the passive animal, again, and again, to the rhythm of Sime's livid oaths.

The girl vanished from the doorway. Tory's steps lagged indecisively. Sime threw down the whip and strode to the door of the shack. There, he reached behind the door and brought out his gun.

Tory's heart came into her mouth. *He wouldn't dare*—He had given no sign that he had seen her, but there had been nothing to conceal her approach.

"Here, you Melsie." His voice was rough. "Shoot that gopher out there by the trail."

A gopher stood upright a few paces beyond Tory. It dropped to run a few feet, then stood again, straight as a wooden stake. Sime pointed it out to the girl who stood trembling in the doorway again.

"I—I cain't, Sime. I cain't tech that gun. I'm skeered of it." Her voice was shrill with fear and she shrank back.

Tory hesitated, uncertain whether to advance or retreat. Sime made up her mind. He lifted the rifle. The gopher moved to cross the trail. The bullet killed it almost at her feet.

"There! See how easy it is to shoot all kinds of varmints. Or skeer 'em, anyways." He laughed unpleasantly. "Melsie, you hitch up and fotch water from the crik."

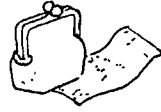
Tory walked swiftly past the Prader shack toward the ridge. She did not know whether it was anger or fear, or homesickness, that brought a sob into her throat. But she did know she hated the dried-out land, and the blazing sun, and the whistling gophers! She hated everything about the bitter, violent country.

From the ridge she saw Prader's stoneboat move toward

the water hole with the barrel. The homemade runners bumped over the uneven prairie. The barrel jolted, rising, falling, like a boat adrift at sea. Beside the barrel Melsie's calico-clad figure swayed and jerked, too.

Melsie reached the water hole before Tory reached home. Her thickening body began stooping, lifting, emptying pail after pail. Swif left his work and went to help the girl. Tory's heart warmed to the Irish lad and the desolation she had felt melted away.

Back home, she lighted a fire and took molasses, vinegar, flour and butter from the shelves. There was not much on the prairie to make pie from, but these things mixed together and baked in a tender crust made Swif's favorite dessert. He called it candy pie.



Chapter 9. They woke one morning in September to find three inches of snow on the ground. Tory shivered at the unseasonable and strange whiteness. Against it the fence posts and buildings stood out in stark relief beneath the low gray clouds.

Before noon, rain was falling in a steady downpour which wore away the snow. At the end of three days it had brought water back to the well. It had spread faint green on the hills. It had strung pools of silver along the coulee, too.

Breaking plows were rushed onto the soaked sod, and a golden Indian summer interval slipped by like an expectant pause in time. In the pause Lane and Big Jon, Sandy and Prader, worked their fields in the deep, brooding silence which cradled the land. There were few birds lingering now, and only an occasional gopher or badger showed head above ground.

There had been no harvest, and as September wore away, the days shortened alarmingly. Nights brought bitter and more bitter frosts. The green disappeared and left a drab, faded brownness over everything. Tory longed for home. Even studying the new winter catalog could not ease her longing.

The only break in the monotony was the infrequent passing of wagons on the way in to Flatland. Sometimes they stopped. It was early in October that the Frenchman stopped, on his way out.

"I like to buy one heifer calf," he announced.

"Cash?" Lane asked. "Heifers are worth real money, even the yearling critters."

"I got de monee. How much? Forty dollar?"

Tory blinked at Lane. Forty dollars in real money! Forty dollars would buy many of the things they needed desperately!

Lane nodded quick acceptance of the Frenchman's offer. After the calf had been loaded and the man had gone, he brought the money to Tory.

"Get your catalog order ready. Someone will be going to Flatland before long."

Visions of furniture, dishes, frocks, danced through Tory's mind. It was hard deciding what should be ordered. She looked at a pictured organ. But there was not room in the shack for that.

Heavy overshoes and thick stockings; buttons and thread for mending. Serviceable dishes and another kettle. The list grew, and shrank, and grew again, as frequent calculations forced elimination of items. Tory spent the evenings over the thick catalog, not aware of the tense lines which were growing around Lane's mouth.

But one afternoon she saw him standing motionless, watching the horses paw at the half frozen ground. The poor hay in the stack was not adequate feed. He came in, later, his shoulders dejected.

"I'm going to drive the broncs down toward Willow Bunch tomorrow. Good grazing there, and they can shift for themselves until spring. I've barely enough feed for the mares and colts."

"But is there shelter? And how about water?" The plan sounded inhuman to Tory.

Lane's face relaxed somewhat. "Broncos have lived on the open prairie for centuries. They're tough. They forage for feed, and eat snow for water. Many farmers turn them loose

in winter. Domestic horses, of course, would be another matter. They couldn't take that kind of life."

"But the cold?" Tory still felt it was not right.

"Broncs can look out for themselves. They grow a heavy coat. They'll come in rolling fat next spring. You'll see."

"Suppose someone steals them?" She was remembering the rumor Swif had heard, and Jon's words that summer evening. The land to the south was a land of mystery to her. There, anything could happen.

"What makes you say *that*?" He swung about at her with shoulders jerking, and his face stony. "Are you trying to taunt me purposely?"

Before the icy, but wild anger in his eyes Tory fell back a step. For a moment she was afraid. But the anger went out of him as swiftly as it had come.

"Forgive me, Tory," he said humbly. "Guess I'm just worried half crazy over the feed situation." He sighed wearily. "Makes me remember—and I must not remember—" Then he was silent, and Tory wondered if he had really said those last words.

The lives of the others on Jarvis Prairie seemed resolved into sanity by simple decisions which remained impossible to Lane. Sandy had a tiny income from the Old Country. It provided for his simple needs. Big Jon planned to work in Regina for the winter, leaving his oxen in Sandy's care.

Tory wondered about Fern, telling herself she did not care if the girl went or stayed, but the prospect of the bleak winter frightened her. What did one do, when snow closed one tight within the small, crowded shack?

And Christmas? At home, autumn had always meant that the gay holiday season was not far ahead. It had meant parties, long choir practises for the cantatas and the special anthems for Christmas week services at the church. It had meant friends gathering, gaiety and security, and no mysteries which

wound into your soul. Unbearable homesickness gripped Tory if she dared let herself think about Christmas at home.

No one knew what Prader's plans were, nor how the man and his wife lived. The poverty of the place was appalling. Tory could not help worrying over the girl and the ordeal before her. Perhaps childbirth was no problem to prairie women.

Truth to tell, Tory had little pity to spare. She felt alone and neglected. She resented Lane's preoccupation with his horses and his land. She pitied herself, when she looked at the bleak and frozen land about her.

Lane and the land were strangely alike. Big, virile, ruthless. The land had a purpose to which all must conform, the inexorable spread and growth of life. Lane had a purpose, too—to force the land to yield to *him*. Tory wished now that she could feel some of the hope and confidence she had seen in Lane last spring.

Even now, when Lane spoke of next year, his eyes lit with faith. Looking at the barrenness surrounding them, Tory was not so sure. The land could defeat them again.

A wagon came rumbling up the slope. Tory began to tremble. They could send out her waiting order, and when Lane went to Flatland next week for winter supplies and fuel, the things would be back from Winnipeg!

The wagon belonged to a stranger, but Fern and Jon sat on the seat beside the driver. The team stopped. Jon leaped down and went to find Lane at the barn. Tory crushed down her dislike of the girl and went to speak to her.

"You're going out for the winter?" she glanced at Fern's trunk, saw what was under it in the high, three-deck box. The wagon was full of oats.

Fern nodded. "I'm going to do sewing in Regina this winter."

Jon returned with Lane at his side. Lane instantly stepped up on the hub and scooped grain into his hands. His eyes were

wistful as he allowed the oats to trickle slowly through his fingers back into the load.

"Good grain," he approved. Tory caught his glance at the colts in the corrals. Suddenly all the things on her long order blank seemed trivial and unnecessary. Lane's need of feed for his stock was desperate.

"Is the grain for sale?" Tory plucked at Jon's sleeve.

He nodded. "Oats don't bring much—always cheap."

"Would forty dollars buy the load?" she questioned quickly.

"Forty dollars would buy most of them," he told her. Tory ran forward and cried up at the driver. "We'll buy the oats."

"Cash?" asked the shrewd farmer from out beyond, where local showers had made crops good. He looked down at her hopefully.

"Cash," she agreed, while Lane stared at her open-mouthed. She could not have said why she was doing this. She hated the horses. But now he would not have to drive the broncs into the south country. And the sudden look of relief in Lane's eyes was worth the sacrifice.

After the grain had been shoveled into a bin, after the wagon bearing Fern and Jon and the stranger had gone on toward the ridge, Lane came to her side. He squeezed her hand awkwardly, unable to speak. But the glow of his dark eyes was compensation enough for Tory.



Chapter 10. The silence of the short November days ground Tory's nerves to a fine, keen edge. The chill now was sharp and real, and the sibilant wind which blew about the shack constantly, hissed in ceaseless spitefulness of the emptiness and isolation about her. She had not liked Fern, but the land seemed empty without her.

There was no diversion from the monotony of the hours, except standing in the doorway looking at the same hills and coulees, gazing down the long, endless trail. Sometimes she found herself listening for some sound besides the wind, some sound of friendly companionship. There were Sandy and Swif and Lane, of course, but Tory craved feminine companionship.

One gray day there *was* sound. A warm sun had thawed the crust on the fields slightly, and Sime Prader was disking. The thin, high scream of the ungreased implement came over the land and was discordant on the air. Lane had given up field work weeks before, but Sime was disking the unplowed sod. The outfit moved up and down the land, with Sime jerking his horses back to their haunches every so often, or holding them reined tight so that he might flay them with the long whip he always carried.

Tory's spirits were at lowest ebb that day. The whine of Sime's disk made her skin crawl. There was no escaping the constant noise, as the rusty disk shrieked ceaseless protest against the stone-hard, frozen sod. She shivered, and shook down the fire as a spatter of rain was flung against the pane.

For ten days a dullness had gripped her body and a new tension pulled at her nerves.

She pushed the kettle forward, and turned to smooth a lace-edged cloth over one corner of the table. She brought one of her Belleek cups, and set out a plate of thinly sliced, buttered bread. That was how they served it back home. For the hour she would pretend in desperation that she had a caller. Perhaps that would dispel the desperate homesickness which engulfed her.

The tea warmed her, but the pretense could not shut out the sound of the wind, nor the persistent whine of Prader's disk. It could not push back the unplastered wall, nor make a roomy, cheerful parlor of the place. And it did not ease the weakness in her stomach.

Head buried in her arms she shed the first tears in the eight months—could it possibly be only eight months?—since her arrival on the prairie. She wanted to go home, and she knew the wish had been lurking in her mind for slow, lonely months.

Determined to write while her courage held, and ask her Mother for passage money home, she rose and found paper and pen. She began to write with furious speed, pouring upon the paper all the pent misery of her loneliness. Gravely intent, it was a long time before she became aware that Lane was standing at her elbow.

Shaken back to sanity by his presence, she allowed the pen to slip from her fingers. For a moment she could not meet his eyes.

"Do you really feel—all that?" With desperate quietness he indicated what she had written.

Tory's eyes lifted slowly. She looked at his buttoned chore jacket, at his cold-reddened hands. Her lips moved but no words came. She nodded, mutely.

His eyes held hers. That odd little depression in his right cheek deepened. Suddenly he flung up his head angrily. But

the queerness was not in his eyes now. They were as sane as daylight.

"God knows I don't want to keep you here if you hate it—that much." His glance flicked coldly to the letter. "But don't ask your family for money, as if—as if you were destitute. As if we had nothing."

Tory's glance slid quickly around the pitifully bare room. Seeing the look, Lane laughed with bitterness. The harsh sound told her how much she had hurt him, down under the rage.

"Destitute! That about sums it up, doesn't it? You couldn't even have new shoes because the horses needed feed." He jerked away from the table to stride to the stove. "I'll get you the money, somehow."

Contrite, Tory sprang after him. He moved toward the door. She grasped at the sleeve of his jacket.

"Lane, I don't—"

He shook her off angrily, and snatched open the door.

"Lane!" she cried despairingly, but the door slammed behind him. For a moment she stared at the door. Memory of that other time, when he had ridden away on Pitch, was a turmoil in her brain. The land had been soft then, but now it was rock hard. Fear took hold of her.

"Lane! Lane!" She ran after him, her feet making a hollow sound on the hard ground. She did not want to leave him. She had to explain that to him, and tell him how much she loved him. That was the thing she should have done months ago.

Suddenly they were both stopped by a sharp and harsh sound on the wind. The loud report of gunfire was flung across the yard.

The unexpectedness of it brought a gasp from Tory. It brought Lane back, and both of them stared down across Sime Prader's field.

Close on the shot there was a high scream. Swif, working behind the barn, came running, and the three of them stared at

the spot where Prader's disk had been. But the disk was no longer there. Sime's horses, led by the rangy bay, had bolted at the report of the gun. They raced madly across the field, the disk bouncing after them.

"Look!" Swif cried, and then they saw Melsie staggering from her house with the gun in her hands. The girl ran unsteadily, past the pigpens and the shed. On the plowed field she stumbled and fell headlong, and lay still.

Down at the end of Sime's field Sime's body lay still, too.

In the brief second before they all began to run, Tory knew what had happened. Sime had been punishing the bay again, and Melsie had at last found courage to take the gun in her hands.

Tory ran, and Swif ran at her side. That murderous disk would not stop for Melsie. Lane leaped to a horse and dashed down across the land to where Sime lay.

Tory reached the girl at last. She lay moaning with convulsions of pain.

"Help me lift her quickly, Swif." Tory bent over the heavy body, knowing the girl was in labor, knowing, too, that it was thirty miles to Flatland and the nearest doctor!

"Let me." Swif thrust her aside and took the girl in his long arms easily. "Open the door," he commanded as he strode toward the shack.

Tory reached the door and pushed it open just as a swift baptism of rain was flung over them from the threatening skies. The rain was sharp and cold and penetrating.

"It's going to rain hard!" she gasped, leaning against the closed door a moment before she dashed to prepare the bed for Melsie.

The pitiful poverty of the place wrung Tory's heart. There were no curtains at the windows, no pictures on the walls. Daylight showed through a hundred holes in the unshingled roof.

"I'll shake the fire quick." Swif turned to the small two-

burner stove with its stovepipe oven. "We'll need plenty of hot water. There might be plenty of time. Hadn't you better—see?" he suggested.

At first Tory did not understand. Then she was terrified.

"But—I don't know what to do for her. Lane will ride for the doctor at once."

"He can't possibly get here until midnight," Swif commented dryly. "You'll have to do for her." He was lighting the lamp on the bare table now, and his words were a bald statement that Tory wanted stubbornly to resist. Twilight was pressing ominously against the panes. Overhead the rain pelted with dreary steadiness.

On the bed Melsie's body convulsed again. Tory ran to take the girl's chilled and limp hands. The pain passed and the hands relaxed. The girl looked up in swift gratitude. Tory wiped the moisture from the white forehead.

After a time, the girl half started out of bed.

"The gun! I shot him. *I shot him*," she screamed. "He—he allus wanted me to shoot the gun. I did. I—"

"Hush," Tory soothed. "You'll need your strength. Drink this and then lie still." Swif had brought a cup of water. Tory marveled that the clumsy, easy-going lad knew so unerringly what to do.

Lane came in, with Sandy at his side. After a look at their faces there was no need to question them. Sandy crossed the room and silently stirred the fire. Lane came and looked down at the girl on the bed, who was writhing in pain again.

"Hold her hands, like this," he instructed Tory. "Pull."

Tory blinked, and stared after him as he went to fill the dishpan and place it on the stove beside the kettle.

"*She* will have to have a doctor." Lane's words disposed of Sime with dreadful finality. "I'll ride to Flatland for Doctor Thomas. We're got to report this business to the Mounty anyway," he added grimly.

The rain roared overhead. A trickle fell upon the bed.

There was the gurgling sound of a dozen dribbles striking floor and table. Some hissed on the hot stove.

"Sandy, help me move the bed a little." Tory scanned the roof desperately for the place with the fewest leaks, and put her shoulder against the bedpost.

The new spot was better for the present. Swif and Sandy made ready to go out. Lane pulled on his cap.

"Ride home and get something warmer to wear, Lane," she entreated, putting a hand timidly on his arm. He looked down at her and after a long moment took her fingers and pressed them firmly.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently. "I'll bring the doctor as soon as I can." Then he was gone.

Tory looked appealingly at Sandy, dreading to be left alone with the girl.

"We maun go, lass, down to the end of the field. Bring—" He did not need to finish. Even a dead man must be brought out of the rain.

"We'll shingle the roof when we get back," Swif stated quietly, taking up the lighted lantern.

"If ye need us, signal the lamp up and down," Sandy added. It was completely dark now. He went out. Swif waited a bit, shuffling and fumbling with something at the door. Then he followed Sandy, and Tory was alone with Melsie. She dreaded the task facing her with unutterable dread. If only she knew what to do—

But there was no time for indecision. Melsie began to weep desperately. Tory tried to comfort her. The girl kept repeating words over and over in a rasping whisper.

"I hated Sime. I allus hated him. I didn't never want to marry him. Pa said I had to. Sime gave Pa whiskey. I allus—hated—him—"

Tory put her arms about the now shivering girl and smoothed the dark and tumbled hair.

"Everything will be all right. Don't fret, now—" Oh, God,

please let everything be all right, until help comes! "Just rest when you can. The doctor is coming."

Thirty miles to Flatland. Tory calculated every mile in stark panic. Three hours of fast riding to reach town—at least as long for the doctor to make the journey out. What if he did not get here before—Oh, if Lane could have stayed to help her!

Between pains, Melsie seemed to lie in a stupor. Tory reckoned time again. Six hours would bring the time past midnight. Had she heard somewhere that babies were always born at midnight? The doctor *had* to get here, she insisted to herself.

The minutes dragged on. Again and again Tory caught herself dozing under the hypnotic sound of the rain on the roof. Once she dreamed she heard a gunshot out in the night. She ran to the door. That was absurd, of course. Her memory was playing tricks. There was nothing there in the night but rain and wind—and emptiness. She was allowing the tragedy to prey on her mind. Sime was dead now. The unexpected sound of gunshot was a thing she would not be forced to hear again.



Chapter 11. Wakeful again, Tory gave her attention to the stove. With the roof leaking in a hundred spots dampness was spreading in the room. It seemed to her she had scarcely left the bed when Melsie cried out with another pain. She ran back to the girl, a sweat of fear breaking out all over her body.

Rain dribbled onto the bed with dismal steadiness. The quilt over Melsie's shoulders was soaked. Frantically, Tory moved the bed again. How long would Swif and Sandy be gone? How much shingling could they accomplish in the darkness and the downpour? Would the doctor arrive in time? That fear harried her constantly.

"Nothing is going to hurt you," she kept repeating, again and again, as the dark-eyed girl on the bed clung to her hands. She hoped her words were true. What could the law do to the girl for shooting a pig like Sime? "Look, dear, drink some of this tea," she urged gently.

Sandy came in, drenched to the skin. Swif trailed him, sort of backing into the room and fumbling with the door as if he were having difficulty shutting out the storm. Tory wondered at his awkwardness but asked no questions. She gave them tea. She kept a worried and watchful eye on Melsie, and was anxiously preoccupied with counting time between pains. How long before the doctor would arrive?

"What is Doctor Thomas like?" she asked Sandy.

"Scotch. He was a minister, when first he came out fra

the old country. But he was a doctor, too. He decidit doctors were needit most, here."

Swif put down his empty cup and glanced sympathetically toward the bed. Melsie was tossing, muttering wildly to herself. Murder blazed for a moment in Swif's eyes.

"That old sonabitch!" he said explosively, referring to Sime. "He treated her cruel mean."

"She has had a bad time," Tory agreed.

"Ain't her hair pretty?" Swif was gazing down at the tumbled black mass spread against the pillow, his gaze softening as suddenly as his anger had blazed a moment before. Tory nodded in agreement and smoothed the quilts again.

Sandy scanned the sieve-like roof thoughtfully.

"We'd best begin shinglin' in yon corner," he indicated the section directly over the bed. "Make a spot to keep the puir lassie's bed dry, first. Did ye see a ladder at the barn?" he asked Swif.

Swif shook his head. "There is one at Lane's. I'd best fetch it, do the milking while I'm there."

"Let the chores go," Tory commanded, "we must get shingles on the roof here. Hurry with the ladder."

"The milking must be done," Swif insisted. "It won't take long."

"We'll have to get hammers, too," Sandy added, and went out with Swif. Tory was alone again, with the slow minutes creeping past like slaves driven reluctantly by the steadily rising wind. Ten minutes—fifteen—twenty—how long would it take the doctor to reach them?

And what if he and Lane got lost on the dark prairie? Such things did happen. The thought terrified her. With shaking fingers she placed the lamp in the single window.

Swif and Sandy had returned now, and overhead their hammers beat a steady tattoo in the rain. Bang, bang, bang—nail after nail after nail, as the minutes wore away.

And the pains came regularly. With each one the girl on

the bed re-lived the horror of the day. Each time, she struggled until she was spent, then relaxed to weep hopelessly, muttering.

"I hated him. I allus hated him. Serve him right to be shot." A raindrop fell on her hand. She stared in stupid surprise. "W—what's it raining for?"

Tory wondered, too, why it rained now, when day after day through the long, hot summer, when they had so desperately needed rain, none had fallen. But she had scant time for thought tonight. The pains were coming with increasing frequency now. Tory was so busy she no longer heard the hammers over her head, nor the steamy sizzle as rain leaked around the hot stove pipe.

She was laboring with Melsie now, her mind in agonized convulsions as she tried to fight back the fear that Doctor Thomas would be too late. Swif came down from the roof once.

"They ought to be comin' soon," he agreed when Tory asked the time. He went and looked down at Melsie again. She lay muttering, unconscious of her surroundings, until the door closed again.

That roused her.

"Sime, don't hit me—I ain't done nothin'—the man jest helped me fill the barrel—He—he only—no, no, Sime—I cain't tech the gun—I'm afraid of it!" Her voice rose to a shriek.

She subsided, sobbing, as another wave of pain came.

Tory clung to her hands, pulling as Lane had told her to do, until her back ached from the strain. Her heart ached, too, for the months she had lived so near to this poor, desperate girl who had needed a friend so terribly.

She wished now that she had had the courage to defy Sime Prader. Perhaps it was too late to befriend the girl now. Presently the police would come and Melsie would have to pay for Sime's death.

"They're coming," Swif shouted from the roof at last. Melsie was just sinking back against the pillows after a grueling pain. Tory ran to fling open the door, ignoring the strong wind, and the rain which lashed her face. There was a sound of hoofs and wheels coming down the trail from the ridge. Relief ran through her, easing every nerve and muscle.

A lantern swung from the dashboard of the doctor's buggy. It threw a circle of wet and ghostly light into the yard. The doctor stepped down into the light as the buggy stopped. Lane dismounted, too. Together they came into the house as Swif climbed down from the roof to care for the jaded horses.

"Are we in time?" the doctor asked quietly. He and Lane threw open soaked coats and sighed wearily. They were chilled to the bone. Lane's hair fell in damp curls about his forehead as he turned to pat Tory's shoulder reassuringly.

She nodded in answer to the doctor's question. She was too weak with relief to speak. Turning to the stove she poured for each of them a cup of the bitter, brewed tea left from that which she had made hours earlier for Swif and Sandy.

Doctor Thomas warmed his hands over the stove.

"How often?" he questioned, glancing toward the bed.

"Fifteen minutes," Tory guessed. Time was something which had been standing still for her since darkness came.

The doctor drank the strong tea quickly, and washed briskly in a pan Tory set out for him. Lane, seeing the preparation, buttoned his coat again and left the room. Tory waited. A sudden dribble of rain hissed on the stove. The sound was loud in the room as the doctor crossed to the bed and spoke with gentle reassurance to the girl there while he made a brief examination. Overhead, the sound of hammering quickened as Lane joined Swif and Sandy at the task there.

The examination over, Doctor Thomas began to button his coat, making ready to go out.

"Wh—where are you going?" Tory questioned in quick alarm.

"To help with the shingling," he replied quietly. "You are doing splendidly. You can call me very quickly, if—"

"No! No!" Tory cried. "I don't know what to do for her. I—I'm afraid!"

"Do just what you have been doing. It will be an hour or two yet. I'll look in frequently. But we must get this place dry before the baby comes. It will be snowing before morning."

As he went out Tory noticed the thin, inadequate glimmer of the doctor's lantern, still burning on the dash. It made the night so black beyond and outside its small circle. She shivered and crushed back a sob in her throat.

Melsie cried out again. She closed the door and ran across the room. The hammering overhead became a hail of sound. The rain came in wind-driven sheets of sound, too, and Melsie writhed and groaned. The pain lasted longer than the others. In panic Tory cried out for Doctor Thomas.

When he came in he spoke to her with gentle firmness.

"But *she* is having the child, my dear."

Before the gentle reproof in his words Tory felt suddenly ashamed.

"Tell me what to do," she whispered humbly.

"Just what you have been doing. I'll be here when the time comes." He returned to the task above.

Melsie's child, a boy whose cry rose to the rafters at the instant of birth, was born at dawn. Doctor Thomas was there, as he had promised he would be. Tory held the blanket in readiness. She had sent Lane to their own house for the blanket and other things which might be needed.

She took the squirming infant from the doctor's hands. It was the first time she had ever seen a naked, new-born babe. The sight sickened her, and yet she could not but marvel that the babe was so complete; arms and fingers in miraculous perfection, vigorous legs and sturdy, well-formed back. For all that, however, its seeming fragility alarmed her as she drew the blanket close.

Pale light filtered through the windows as she carried the howling bundle to the table where a basin, and oil provided by the doctor, waited. There, too, waited the few poor garments Melsie had inexpertly sewed from flour sacks, sacks upon which the gaudy printing still showed.

But at the table, separated from the doctor's calm presence, Tory was suddenly afraid of the task before her. The binder, now, a straight strip of torn cloth, how should that go on?

"I—I don't know how to do this," she cried out to Doctor Thomas. "He—he looks so easy to hurt."

"I'll tell you exactly what to do," Doctor Thomas assured her. "On the prairie, every woman must know what to do when new life comes. There simply are not doctors enough to go round."

Tory's fingers shook a little in the beginning. But the child had surprising strength and that gave her confidence. She washed him, and pinned the narrow binder tightly into place.

"Too tight?" she questioned when a robust wail came unexpectedly.

"It should be snug," Doctor Thomas smiled. "And it is good when a child cries like that in the beginning. Makes them strong at once."

When she had finished, the doctor took the babe to Melsie.

Great, thick flakes of snow whirled against the window panes now, and daylight showed the land rapidly whitening to the far horizon—every hill and slope and coulee being smoothed to a sheet of shadowless white. Against the upper sash of the window a small icicle was forming, as steam collecting on the inside of the glass ran in tiny rivulets down the pane to leak between the joint. It was freezing hard now. As the water ran down the ever-lengthening icicle, each drop hung a moment on the end, then froze into place. Winter had come.

The hammering above had eased altogether. Tory poured more coal into the small stove. She must get breakfast for the weary men. She inspected the scanty supplies the place af-

forded. Half a loaf of Melsie's bread; some tea, a little coffee and a small plate of butter was the sum of them.

Swif came in. Tory despatched him to her own cupboards for other necessities—milk, sugar, jam, eggs and more bread. As Swif stepped out, a scarlet-coated figure came in. It was Harrison. Lane followed him in.

Busy putting coffee to boil, Tory greeted the man briefly. The men all hovered close to the stove in the damp-smelling room. They talked in low tones, fearing to disturb the now sleeping Melsie.

"Tell me just what happened." This grimly official Harrison was a different man from the whistling, cheerful one of the summer patrol. "Had this Prader threatened his wife?"

No one answered and the silence in the room grew. Sandy spoke at last, a trifle diffidently, Tory thought.

"None of us knew much about the mon. He disliked neighbors, had made it plain he wanted nothing tae do wi' any of us. We heard the gun go off, saw the team bolt, and saw Sime lying in the field."

"Has the body been examined thoroughly?"

Sandy shook his head. "We wor-rked by lantern light. We just took the stoneboat out, brought it in to the barn. We had to get at shingling the roof here."

Weary to the bone, Tory only half listened. She could go no further with breakfast preparations until Swif returned. Feeling great need for a breath of the outdoor air, she snatched a coat from behind the door and went outside.

The wind blew through her skirts. The snow was fine and hard. The air cut her face. She advanced across the yard where the snow, ankle deep already, was beginning to crust. It was not pleasant to be out, but Tory plodded forward, determined to circle the rude barn, hoping that the piercing cold would clear her head.

She was beside the barn before she remembered what lay

inside. The knowledge turned her dizzy and sick. With a shudder she began to run.

Suddenly something under the blanketing snow tripped her hurrying feet. She sprawled headlong, face down, in the snow. Getting to her feet quickly, she saw what had caused her to fall. It was a dead chicken, and against the white feathers of its breast, a stain of clotted blood centered around a bullet wound.

Tory stared at the thing in stupefied fascination as the full meaning of that wound came to her. Swif came trudging toward her, carrying the milk and the bread and the other things he had gone to fetch.

"Swif! Swif, come here, quickly." Tory's heart was beating fast with relief. If this meant what she hoped it did—

He came, stood staring down at the dead fowl.

Impatient with his seeming stupidity, Tory pointed at the blood-clotted feathers and cried, "She—she didn't shoot Sime. Don't you understand? She didn't kill him. It was the disk did it, when the big bay jumped! Serve Sime right, too. He was always abusing the horse."

"W—we couldn't see a bullet mark on him. Just all chopped from the—the knives."

"Oh, I'm glad that's the way it was," Tory cried with a sob of relief. "Glad! Glad! How wonderful for Melsie!"

"We got to tell the Mounty, quick." Swif spoke with determination. He set down the things he carried and took up the dead chicken. By the time Tory reached the door, he was already explaining.

"Look, the shot killed the chicken. The bay is gun-shy! The jump of the bay killed Sime with the disk."

"That's right," Sandy agreed gravely. "The lass shot the gun, but we all know how the bay always leaped when the gun went off. Mebbe Sime wae punishin' the horses—"

"Not much to guess at," Lane put in drily. "He seldom let up beating them."

Tory shuddered, remembering the sharp, high shriek of the disk through all the loneliness of the afternoon before.

Later, after the body in the barn had been examined, and the formalities of the law satisfied, everyone returned to the house. Snow fell heavily, piling thick on everything. The dull, leaden sky promised that it would keep falling for many hours. Harrison looked anxiously toward the ridge.

"We'd better be starting back for Flatland," he said to Doctor Thomas, adding, "What's to become of the girl there?"

"She cannot be moved for the present," Doctor Thomas announced.

Tory opened her mouth to say she would look after Melsie and do what she could for the girl. But she was so unutterably weary, and there was a sudden cold discomfort in her stomach and nausea in her throat. For the moment she could not find speech.

In that brief moment of silence while Lane and Tory stood there facing Doctor Thomas and the policeman, Swif threw his slow voice across the room.

"I want to marry Melsie," he said. "Now, so I can take care of her right. Doctor Thomas can marry us now. I want him to."

Startled looks turned upon him. His young eyes were grimly earnest.

Melsie's voice rose in a weak sobbing cry—"Swif—oh, Swif—"

He went to the girl and knelt over her. They were together, quiet in the shadows.

"It can be managed," Doctor Thomas said, "God willing."

The man in the scarlet coat moved into action again. He had names to take down, details to inquire into and note.

There would be an inquest, he said, and added reassuringly, "Routine, of course; gunshot is involved, and so is the small rifle. The dead fowl will have to be taken as needed evidence."

The lifeless chicken lay on a gunnysack by the door. The

rifle stood just inside, the barrel leaning against the door casing, muzzle up. It was a cheap single-shot gun. The officer extracted the empty cartridge, then returned it to the firing chamber. He made ready to leave, then went over to Melsie and Swif.

"Be of good cheer," he said. "You have friends with you here. All friends."

Tory wondered if Harrison had guessed what she now knew in her heart. All these months, despite all hiding and suppression, love had grown between Melsie and Swif. Then in rebellion against bearing Prader's child, probably driven half-wild by the thought of seeing it suffer under Sime's brutal dominance, her desperation had exploded in revolt.

Certainly Melsie had shot him, although the disk jerked by the abused horse might have done the real killing. And then, Tory shrewdly guessed now, Swif had slipped the rifle out and shot the chicken and left it in the snow to be found later.

Had Harrison guessed it? If so, he had shown he would carry the guess no further. He was sworn to the cause of justice, and surely real justice had been done—

Tory's hand sought Lane's. She felt close, close to him—never so close before—she did not want to leave him, now or ever—She loved him—loved him—loved even his bitter land—

Doctor Thomas married Melsie and Tim Shannon in the simplest possible ceremony before he left with Harrison. The pioneer minister and physician had encountered basically similar situations many times. He assured everyone that the requirements of civil law would be met.

"God will bless this marriage," he said. "It is a triumph of good over violence and evil. And so—good night—good night—"



Chapter 12. Doctor Thomas and Officer Harrison left Jarvis Prairie locked in winter's isolation. Tory felt that keenly after they had gone. But work was waiting to claim them all.

Lane strode toward his barns and the chores waiting there. Sandy set off across the snowy fields for his roof, and Tory remained with Melsie Shannon long enough to make gruel for her, and to show her new husband the routine of caring for the baby, promising to come over daily to relieve him of the more delicate nursing.

It was not until she reached her own door in mid-morning that Tory realized how ill she felt, how tired she was. The weariness dropped from her momentarily, however, when she saw a heap of letters waiting on the table. She had forgotten that a trip to Flatland meant mail.

Lane hurried to take her coat. "Sit here near the stove. The shack got mighty cold, without fire all night. I'll make you some tea while you read your letters." His eyes had their old tenderness, and for an instant his arm drew her close against his heart. The brief moment told her he understood what an ordeal the night had been for her.

She shuffled through the letters eagerly. One from Mother and another from her sister Sarah. One from Harriet, her best girlhood friend. Mother's letter she would save until the last. She unfolded Sarah's closely written pages.

Her sister had written of family doings, and of preparations for Christmas. Harriet described the music the choir was prac-

ting for the holiday season this year. "Last Christmas," Tory thought wistfully, "I was there. I was part of the merriment and the gaiety." The thought brought homesickness in a swift tide.

She tore open her mother's letter. The quaint handwriting sharpened her longing. There was tightness in her throat, a queer flutter in her stomach, a tingling in her breasts.

The sickness persisted as she read. And without warning, Tory knew the meaning of her nausea. How stupid she had been not to guess, days before! Her hand shook uncontrollably. Suddenly she wanted desperately to be home again, where her mother's calm assurances would tell her how right everything would be.

Lane looked at her, turning from the stove.

"Tory, you're white as a sheet. What is it?"

She shook with chills. She could not speak for the tight band around her throat. She was weak as a rag.

"Tory, are you sick?" Lane bent anxiously over her.

The house shuddered and groaned in a violent gust of wind. The shed door rattled on its hinges. A pail hanging out there jingled faintly, and sand-hard snow volleyed against the panes. Tory shivered, and found her voice.

"I hate it here. I hate the loneliness, and the distances. I hate that wind. It drives me mad, blowing so hard day after day after day!" she cried hysterically.

"W-wind. What wind?" Lane looked stupidly from the window.

"That horrible, whining wind. It cries under the eaves like a thousand banshees. It—it—ough—I'm sick." She scurried across the room and out of the shed, retching violently.

Lane followed and held her shaking shoulders gently.

"Tory—is it—are you—?"

She nodded miserably, and began to weep.

"Don't cry, darling. I think it's wonderful." He gathered

her close, or tried to do so. But Tory thrust him back petulantly and turned indoors. He trailed at her heels uncertainly.

"Rest your head back in the chair a few minutes." His eyes were worried as he fussed over her. He made tea in the brown teapot they used every day, and reached for one of the fragile Belleek cups.

"You'd like tea in one of these nice cups, wouldn't you?" His voice was tenderly anxious.

Tory nodded, too wretched to appreciate his attempts to please her. She tried again to read her mother's letter, but tears blinded her. She gave up and wept disconsolately.

Lane brought the tea quickly, carrying the beautiful and fragile cup in both his big hands. If Tory had not been so miserable she could have laughed at the spectacle of him carrying the thin china with such comical care. But she reached mechanically for the tea without lifting her eyes.

She lifted the cup with fingers which were trembling and nerveless from the long, sleepless night, and somehow the thing dropped from her hands, spilling its scalding contents across the table as it went rolling over the edge to smash at her feet.

She stared at the shattered china, and the hopelessness in her heart showed in her face.

"Tory, it was only a cup." Lane's voice was a little frightened as he put his arms about her and drew her close. For a moment she resisted stubbornly, but suddenly she was clinging to him and sobbing like a child.

"It was only a cup," he repeated in her ear, holding her hard. "It was only a cup."

Only a cup. Lane did not know that each time a piece of that Belleek was broken, it was as if a piece were broken out of her heart.

"I want to go home," she sobbed brokenly. "I hate the prairie, and all the emptiness. I hate the hills and the endless

dead grass! Let's sell the land. You could get work in England."

"Sell the land? The horses? Leave Canada?" He stared at her incredulously. A white line appeared about his tight lips. The cleft in his chin seemed more noticeable as Tory stared back at him.

Abruptly he released her, moved to the stove, where he pushed the kettle about aimlessly. He came back to her in a moment.

"Next year it won't be so lonely. There will be more settlers here."

"But what if—the land never settles? If people never come?"

He stared at her in incredible disbelief. This was blasphemy. "Never settles? But it will—it must. The land is waiting for people."

In her mind Tory saw the land, saw, too, the men who might come. Young men and men not so young, old men, with shoulders sagging, bent in weariness. Could men change this bitter land? Through the window she caught a glimpse of the slope and the bluff beyond. The sharp angularity of the bluff was subdued now under the snow, like a bent old man beaten to submission by prairie winds and winters.

She sank miserably into a chair, stubbornly silent, though she was aware she should have told him she had not meant she wanted him to leave the land. "But he should understand how I feel," she persisted to herself with wilful perversity.

Silently he placed another cup of tea before her. She waited for him to speak and when he did not she looked up. The wretchedness in his eyes shocked her. He looked haggard under the stubble of a two-day beard, and utterly weary.

"Lane, forgive me. I didn't mean those things. I want to understand, and to like it here. If it were not so hard to like—" She smiled wanly.

He lifted her, and she wept against his throat. After a time he stirred and looked around the crowded room.

"You'd like it better if we had more room. This winter we'll work on plans for a new house. We'll have that bumper crop some day! Then we'll build on the slope. But for now all we can do is plan to move the Stokes shack. When the snow settles, we'll put it on skids, haul it up. I promised that before. But—when Fern came back—"

Sighing, Tory drew herself out of his arms. Her lips set mutinously. What had Fern to do with them, with Lane and herself? She drank the tea he had brought her, but it could not warm the chill in her heart. Only a sleep of exhaustion brought relief.

For three days the driving wind shot snow out of the north. When the storm cleared, the snow lay deep everywhere. Five-foot drifts lifted long, hard swells between house and barns, formed oppressing white walls only a foot or two from the windows. The thermometer dropped steadily and the frost tracings on the panes grew from a flat, delicate pattern like gossamer lace to a thick coating that was like white fur. It was a fur that did not melt, no matter how warm the room became, so the white wall of snow without did not matter, after all.

Each morning before Lane shook down the banked fire in the cold room, every nailhead in the raftered ceiling was a fuzzy white upholstery button tufting the boards. At night the frost thumped in the walls. Winter, marching its invincible battalions out of the Arctic, had won the plains. Its cold oppression grew sharper day by day, as the mercury dropped—ten below—twenty—thirty—forty-two!

When Tory put her nose outside the door the frost stabbed into her lungs and stung her nostrils. She had never experienced such cold. She chilled through on the short trip to Melsie's each day. And had to spend long minutes warming

her hands before washing and tending Melsie and the baby. Lane only grinned at the cold.

"Sometimes it goes to sixty below! Sixty frigid degrees below zero, and not a stir of wind."

Then they would have reached Melsie's shack, where Swif kept the fires going. There were things to plan for Swif and Melsie. She could forget the cold, until it was time to go out again.



Chapter 13. The winter days fell into an exact monotony. Two or three times a week Sandy walked across the crusted snow and remained for supper. Once a week, weather permitting, Tory called on Melsie. And Tory learned about the business of snow melting.

Two large oak barrels had been rolled indoors after that first heavy snow. Every day since, those barrels had to be fed huge cakes of hard-packed snow. The cakes were broken from the firm drifts around the house, and stuffed into the barrels until they would hold no more. There, the room's temperature gradually melted them, and from there water was carried to the cows and the precious mares.

Winter mornings were bitter cold, with ice crusting the water in the teakettle on top of the stove, with the cold boiled potatoes on the shelves frozen to a crystallized solid. Tory came to accept all these things in time, as she had the hearty farm breakfast of porridge, of fried side meat and warmed potatoes, and quantities of bread and prunes.

Daylight came late, and by four in the afternoon darkness was coming. At nine, those winter evenings, Lane put down his magazine or farm paper, and made ready for a last inspection of stock and stalls. That evening visit to the barns was a ritual with him.

Sometimes, simply for the sake of a break in the monotonous day, Tory went with him. Bundled to the ears, she would stand in the feedway of the barn and watch Lane go from stall to stall—pausing here to look at a mare, there to

look in upon Pitch. And then the skittish, half-grown colts, unkempt and shaggy now in their winter coats. They grew wild in spite of Lane's constant handling, as he sought to accustom them to his mastery. When they shied away from him he laughed at their spirit.

But when he reached the stall where Luck's golden sorrel hide gleamed in the lantern light, there was always a change in Lane. Light held high, he would peer triumphantly over the stout plank wall at the filly.

Since the beginning there had been antagonism between these two. Sometimes the colt lifted her nose, and her inquisitive, rather wide nostrils flared for a brief inspection. Sometimes she ignored him altogether. But always, if he put out a hand to touch her, there would be a flick of her tail, a twist of her body, and sharp hoofs kicking the planking soundly.

"Spirited little devil," Lane would mutter in pleased satisfaction. A moment later he would close the barn for the night. That look at Luck made the day satisfying and complete for Lane.

Then under brilliant stars which sometimes seemed low enough to touch, they walked back across the yard, where the firm crust of deep drifts whined frosty protest under their boots. As they walked, the lantern light threw their shadows fantastic distances ahead. Tory wondered whimsically, sometimes, if those shadows really reached the Border, forty miles south.

The winds which had brought winter to cover Lane's disappointing field seemed to have erased his discouragement. Already he was looking forward eagerly to another spring. He talked of the future; of the house they would one day build on the slope, of the fields of wheat, once all the sod was turned. He spoke, too, of the pastures and fences which would some future day stretch down to the creek. His words made Tory hear the thunder of hoofs on the slope.

Christmas brought a welcome break in the cold monotony. Melsie and Swif came to dinner bringing little Tim. Sandy was there, too. The meal was only a savory brown stew of rabbit, with potatoes and turnips, and Swif's favorite dessert, candy pie.

Melsie's inarticulate gratitude for Tory's presence the night of Tim's birth embarrassed Tory. The girl regarded her as something saintlike, and Tory knew she was not that. But Melsie's childish appreciation of the nice things in the shack touched Tory.

"Your dishes are so beautiful." Melsie held one of the Belleek plates in her hard, thin hands and her eyes glowed. "I didn't know there was such pretty things in the world," she added softly.

Tory noted that Melsie's speech had improved and knew Melsie tried slavishly to imitate her own ways and words. She was suddenly touched by the younger girl's adoration. She turned to the dish shelves and took down a pedestal cake plate of glass. She had brought two with her among her things.

"Melsie, you have this for a Christmas gift." She gave the plate to the girl and then, because some impulse made her, she leaned forward and kissed her, quickly.

They were very gay that first Christmas. While Tory and Melsie washed dishes, after the dinner, Swif rocked little Tim. Afterward, they sang hymns and carols. Lane's strong voice and Tory's sweet one rose in a Christmas hymn. Sandy took his pipe from his mouth and nodded approval.

"That's a right nice hymn. I mind hearin' that when I was just a lad. I used to sing in the choir then."

Tory turned on him scornfully.

"And you've been listening to us sing, letting us perform for you? Shame! Now you sing for us."

Sandy grinned at her affectionately. Young Tim woke, and Sandy begged to be allowed to hold the rosy youngster briefly. Melsie placed the child in the elderly man's arms.

Looking at the beautiful, dark-eyed child, Tory was suddenly ashamed of the fears and misgivings on the night of Timmie's birth. She had been only a girl then. She was a woman now—a prairie woman, she told herself with pride.

The winter's diet grew increasingly distasteful to her as January weeks wore away. Her garden had produced little except rutabagas and plenty of potatoes. But soon after Christmas the thermometer dropped to fifty below zero and everything in the small, tight cellar froze.

After that, the vegetables had to be peeled quickly under icy water and cooked as fast as possible. They had a sickish, sweet taste that Tory came to hate, as she came to hate the deadly monotony of the meals; meat, potatoes, turnips, bread—turnips, bread, potatoes, meat—bread, potatoes, meat, turnips. No matter how you said it they turned into nothing else. Rutabagas, cooked in soup, or creamed, or mashed and sprinkled with a little brown sugar, were still just turnips. The beef and pork were as solid ice. But the meat became really their only living.

Tory woke one night with the pungent scent of seasoned and boiling cabbage in her nostrils. For a moment, in the icy coldness of the room, she could not believe that the smell was only a dream. But it was! There was probably no fresh cabbage even in Flatland.

All day that smell haunted her. The next night she dreamed she held a great head of green cabbage in her hands. In her dream she cut through the head, aching for a glimpse of the crisp and solid center. But the halves fell apart, and the thing was hollow. Ill with disappointment, she could not eat next morning.

Lane looked up from sugaring his oatmeal. He had his own way of doing this small task, not by shaking the spoon, but by holding it still, and tapping the handle lightly with the end of a finger, so that with each tap a few grains bounced out of the spoon.

"Aren't you going to eat?" A final tap emptied his spoon.

"I wish I'd had luck with my cabbage last summer," she sighed, pushing back the untasted oatmeal. "I'm so hungry for cabbage that I smell it in my dreams. I'm dying for some. Silly, isn't it?" She smiled wanly.

He looked at her sympathetically. "Perhaps if you fix some turnips real nice, with butter and brown sugar—"

"Turnips!" Tory left the table hurriedly.

At noon she could not look at food. In mid-afternoon Lane stood outside the door and surveyed the clear, cold sky.

"Think I'll drive into Flatland for a load of coal tomorrow," he announced. "I can't risk our running out."

The thought of the long, cold miles dismayed Tory.

"What if a sudden storm blows up?" She knew violent storms could blow up in an hour's time; knew, too, how easily a traveler could get lost on the snowy waste.

"W-well, it looks clear. I'll see what Sandy thinks of the weather. He's a fairly good prophet."

Tory raised no more arguments. It did not occur to her that Lane could be taking such risks to get her things she was hungering for.

He set out at five the next morning, three hours before full daylight came. He looked like a great bear in his shaggy buffalo coat, with a fur cap pulled down to the eyebrows, as he bade Tory goodbye. He had one of her woollen scarfs swathed round his neck.

Travel would be slow over the unbroken trail. Lane intended to load the coal that afternoon, rest the team the night, and return home the following day. Swif came to do the milking and other chores for Tory. That night, Tory slept and awakened, slept and awakened again, aching with irrational hunger at every awakening.

The following day she found herself standing, minutes on end, before the window, staring up the empty trail toward the ridge. It was getting dark when she saw sleigh and horses

come over the rise. The surge of relief was so strong its ebbing left her faint.

The thermometer stood at thirty below zero. But Tory got into her coat, and the moment the sleigh turned into the yard she ran outside.

"Lane! Lane! You're home—safe! Are you all 'right?" she screamed against the wind.

He held up a bulging gunny sack as he crawled stiffly out of the sleigh.

"Cabbage, ma'am! Cabbages! All there was in town. Get back inside before you freeze your hungry face."

Laughing, yet half crying, Tory embraced Lane, then ran in to stir the fire. When Lane brought the cabbage in, she seized a head and cut it through quickly. Hunger surged through her again. She thrust the longed-for food into a kettle with water and salt pork, covered it and shoved the kettle forward. Not until then did she turn to the pile of letters Lane had brought. She settled down with a soft sigh of satisfaction.

The kettle began to sing as she tore open the first of her letters. Its drone grew louder. The smell of the boiling vegetable filled the room. Tory lifted her head, sniffing uncertainly. That odor was not the heavenly fragrance she had dreamed of with such utter desire. The cabbage was frozen, of course—spoiled—foul.

Holding her nose, gagging, she collided with Lane at the door.

"Take it out! Take the kettle out!" she signaled with her free hand. "Ugh! Oh, Lane, what a shame! Oh—oo!"

He laughed softly, holding her close for a moment before throwing out the kettle.

Then Lane produced his real treat. There were packages of dried fruits—nuts—candies—chocolates—and other good things.

"Lane! It's wonderful!"

And it was. Tory could say no more. She did not know until later that Lane had made the hard and dangerous trip only to get these things for her. She was only sure of his love for her and her faith in him.

Knowing nothing of the violence of Canadian winters, Tory had at first counted the days until it would be possible to move that shack from across the coulee up beside their own. At first the snow was not hard enough, and after that it got too deep. As the months passed there never seemed a time exactly right for the task, and Tory could understand that with snow eight feet deep in the coulee, moving the shack was impossible until spring came again.

And truth to tell, she did not much mind. There was summer coming and then it would be moved. Now Lane was busy with a hundred tasks. Mending harness interminably, repairing stalls, and building new boxes for the spring's expected foals. There was that daily task of preparing the hot mash for the mares, of carrying water up over the mountainous drifts which hid house from barn.

Very often, as he was seated before the fire those winter evenings, mending a broken bridle or stitching a tug, Lane spoke with his sure confidence of the future of Canada.

"Canada has come of age under Laurier," he declared. "He's doing everything possible to bring settlers here from every corner of the globe. And he's brought harmony between the French and English factions, something no other Premier has been able to do. We'll see these prairies become the greatest wheat land on earth!"

And though snow lay deep beyond the walls of the small and crowded shack, though tiny fingers of snow drifted through the crack behind the door constantly and never quite disappeared in spite of the roaring fire they kept in the stove, Lane's words made Tory believe, too, in the future of the land. The vision in his eyes and the flush on his face insisted on belief!

"If there were only churches and schools," Tory said.

"There'll be both, soon as enough people get here. By the time our child is ready for school, there'll be one here." A tenderness came into his eyes. "I—I hope one of this spring's colts proves to be a worthy son of Pitch. Our son can grow up with the colt."

Tory wanted to cry out, "But the baby will be a girl. The prairie needs girls." But just then Lane put aside the harness mending and began to discuss plans for the big house they would one day build. And so, with days made of waiting and planning, with weeks flavored by hope and faith in the land, they came to the end of Tory's first prairie winter.



Chapter 14. Spring comes abruptly on the prairie. One day the air is raw under a gray sky. Wind-worn snowbanks lie in soiled ugliness, and cold cuts cruelly at the face. But the day after, winter is in full retreat down every gully and ravine, withdrawing completely under skies incredibly blue and clear! In that manner it came to Saskatchewan that spring of 1909.

The frost, which had struck five feet below the sod during the winter, melted out with almost audible laughter. Overnight, one felt the certainty of life stirring, and of roots thrusting surely. Tory could understand Lane's unbounded faith in the land. The dazzling sun melted mists of doubt from the soul. The shrill wind blew discouragement away.

Now, Tory thought, looking down across the coulee, it would be but a matter of days before that shack across there would be dragged up the slope to make another room for them. It was pleasant to plan a quiet bedroom, a place where a baby could sleep undisturbed, away from the activity of living.

Lane became busier. The horses required much currying now they were shedding again, and he spent more time handling the yearling colts. They had to be haltered briefly, had to be taught to submit while he lifted their feet. This was the beginning of his mastery. And the foal-heavy mares were a constant concern to him.

The yearlings were gangling and rough coated. Cinnamon and Cloves were lively and promised to become tough and

sturdy. But Lane looked at sorrel Luck with intense pride. In spite of her patchy, shedding coat she was beautiful. She promised all that Lane hoped to breed—spirit, grace, strength, and the inherent ability good blood brought.

And it pleased Lane, too, that she was so difficult to tame. He was sure that in time he could break her to his will, that she would become docile and obedient. But now she was as hard to corner in a corral as the wind itself. To confine her was like trying to catch quicksilver in a sieve.

Tory watched the man and the filly that first spring day. Time and again Lane stepped close to the colt, reaching out until he almost touched the brown mane with the froth of black along its base. And Luck waited motionless until his hand all but touched her. Then with a wicked gleam in her eyes, a quick flirt of heels, she was gone, to blink back at Lane from a distant corner of the fenced enclosure.

"Spunky little devil," Lane admitted in reluctant admiration. "Two years more, and breeding will take some of the run out of her!" There was pride in his voice and in his eyes as he looked at the colt. But Tory looked at Lane, so flushed and confident in the sun. He flung open the corral gate.

"There will be four foals this spring," he announced. "If one of them is a black colt foal, I'll consider I'm lucky. Just look at that filly!" he cried enthusiastically as the colts went galloping down the slope.

Tory had other things on her mind.

"When can that shack across the creek be hauled up here?"

"Well, guess we'll have to wait until the creek water goes down a little. I'm driving into Flatland tomorrow, to get seed wheat and some ground feed. Then there will be the disking and the fanning."

Tory sighed inaudibly. Her second spring on the prairie, and she knew now that everything else must stand aside for the sowing of the wheat.

"I'll plow the garden as soon as I can," Lane announced.

"Couldn't we have the garden plot between the house and the barns, with a fence, and a path running through?" It was a thing Tory had often dreamed about.

"You mean gates to open and close every time I cross the yard to the barn?"

"A fence around the garden makes it seem—well, more like home. And it would be close to the house, easier to run out for a few minutes of weeding now and then."

"Well, it's too late for that this year. The ground there is hard as stone. It would have to be worked well before it would be fit for a garden."

Tory walked back toward the house. Bread dough was waiting to be put into pans. She was proud of her loaves now, thanks to Melsie. She moved heavily, and a trifle awkwardly. Panting slightly from the walk, she stood a moment considering the walls, planning where she would have a new cupboard built, after that shack across the coulee had been hauled up. There would be more room here in the kitchen for convenience, when the bed and the box-dresser were moved out.

She was putting the kettle on for supper when Rover's furious barking startled her. A new wagon drawn by a team of grays was turning into the yard. A man and a woman sat on the seat. The man was Big Jon Iverson. At sight of the woman all the brightness went out of Tory's day. Fern had come back.

Prairie hospitality demanded that Tory hasten to the door and wave a cordial greeting to the two. Lane was striding toward the wagon, too, his magnificent shoulders held with a rigidity Tory had not seen for months.

Fern lifted her arm and waved. She was smiling happily, her serene face flushed and rosy.

"Hello, Tory! Lane!"

Tory never knew what words she returned to that greeting. But she could never forget the sudden roughness in Lane's

voice as he stopped at her shoulder, looking up directly into Fern's gray eyes.

"This is a surprise. You back to stay?"

Fern laughed and looked at the big blond man at her side. Big Jon grinned self-consciously.

"She Mrs. Iverson now. Married in Flatland yesterday."

Tory and Lane both stared, speechless for the moment. Tory could scarcely comprehend the news. They were such an odd pair.

"Well, aren't you going to wish us happiness, aren't you going to help me down?" Fern demanded of Lane, kicking the buffalo robe away from her feet.

"Sure. Sure, Mrs. Iverson." Lane leaped forward, took her extended hand. Tory found her tongue.

"Do come right in. I know you're chilly from the long ride. I was just starting supper, now it will be a celebration." Tory's words came mechanically. She was trying desperately to crush down the old doubts which were rising in her heart.

Lane's voice boomed out in hearty welcome.

"Get down and unhitch, Jon. Put in and feed. Good team you got there." He gave the grays an appraising glance, then reached hospitably to unhook a tug.

"Thank you." Jon spoke in his precise English, which sounded so foreign in spite of the precision. "Carload horses shipped into Flatland from the west. I make good money in Regina, last winter."

Tory managed to speak casually to Fern, as the two went indoors, but mentally she was going over the reserves of her cupboard. There was still a slab of side meat in the cellar, and thank goodness one of the cows had freshened two weeks before. Today she had found two fresh eggs at the barn. She could stir a cake up quickly—for the wedding—the wedding—

"Sit down, Fern, while I go down cellar for a few things." She took Fern's coat, pushed forward a chair.

"You have no idea how good it is to be back!" Fern de-

clared. "Here, let me do that." She stooped to lift the heavy trap door to the cellar for Tory.

Tory carried the lighted lamp down the steps into the dungeon-like dampness below. She scanned her store of supplies. Tinned corn, tomatoes—She made a wry face and picked up a tin of the tomatoes. Tinned tomatoes, she reflected wearily, should be designated the national fruit of the prairie. When one went visiting, one was served tinned tomatoes. If one had visitors—tinned tomatoes.

She put the tin on the steps and turned to skim cream into a pitcher. Above, the door opened, and she heard Lane's quick footsteps enter, heard him speaking to Fern. His words were muffled.

Down in the damp, earthy-smelling cellar Tory felt she was suffocating. Her back muscles began to ache sharply and then she knew she had been standing motionless, bent over the milk pans with the skimmer in her hands. Lane's voice from above jerked her into action.

"Hand the cream up to me, dear, and the tins." He was half way down the steps by that time. She moved toward him and he assisted her up the steep steps gently. Did she imagine that his hands trembled a trifle and that his lips were not smiling but merely twisted in a painful grimace? She looked quickly toward Fern Iverson.

Fern stood before the stove, her back to the trap door as Tory's head came above the floor.

Lane put down the tomatoes and the cream pitcher. Silence grew in the little room until Tory, acutely conscious of her bulk, of the unbecoming way her skirt hiked up in front over the bulge of her body, wanted to scream.

Thankful for the tasks which kept her busy, Tory slipped the pans of bread into the oven, began beating up the cake. Fern spoke presently, and Tory answered, but she could not, afterwards, remember what she said. Somehow Fern's return changed everything.

It was at the supper table an hour later that Fern turned to Lane and then to Tory, smiling.

"We would like to ask a favor of you. Jon's sod dugout is small, and we would like to use my old shack this summer. Would you mind too much?"

Tory's fork paused half way to her mouth. Eyes upon Lane's face, she waited for him to answer Fern. Of course he would tell her they planned to use the shack themselves. But he hesitated.

"Surely you can live there as long as you like, Fern," Tory said quickly. "We'll be glad to do that much for you."

"Thank you, Tory," Fern replied softly. Jon said formally, "We are grateful."

Lane stared at Tory and it seemed to her that tense lines suddenly drew tighter around his unsmiling mouth.

Jon rose regretfully when the meal was over. "We thank you," he said in his quaint manner, "but we must drive on before darkness comes."

"Days are getting longer." Lane found voice. He went on mechanically. "A month ago it was still dark at this time. But the sun's moving north fast now. Once April is here, the days lengthen greatly."

Sick at heart, Tory watched his old pain chill his gaze. He was remote from her again. Tory clenched her hands. She had come this far. She should keep on.



Chapter 13. "Twink and Red Top foaled last night," Lane announced one morning in late May. Tory looked up quickly, seeking on his face his verdict on the colts.

"They are just ordinary, I'm afraid," he commented regretfully. She walked by his side toward the barn for a glimpse of the colts. She had to walk slowly, and felt acutely aware of her own awkwardness as Lane tried to fit his long impatient stride to her steps.

When Lane walked across the yard, or anywhere on the land, there was the effect of speed and irresistible progress. Tory smiled to herself now. It was early morning still, and though the sun was brilliant, the wind had not yet risen.

The new colts were small-boned fillies, moving already with the quick nervousness and the characteristic wariness of the bronco. Neither showed more than the faintest trace of Arabian blood. Both were bays, but they lacked that blue-black skin about the eyes and nostrils, and the black smudge along the base of a brown mane. Bays have black manes, and these colts had black manes.

But they were strong, and full of life and energy, even if they did lack the short-backed body of the true Arabian.

"They move gracefully," Tory offered in consolation.

"Oh, their legs and feet are good enough. Pitch has fine feet. Foot faults in a stud spoil the whole breed. But the colts lack—something. I cannot exactly name it, but it isn't there. Perhaps the food shortage last winter is to blame. The most important year in a colt's life is the year before it is born.

But I'll produce just the colt I want, some of these days!" Lane's face glowed with faith in this passionate dream of his.

Two weeks later Star's colt arrived. Tory knew by the exultant way Lane came striding from the barn that he was excited.

"A coal-black foal! Same markings as Pitch! And spirit from the minute it first moved!"

At the stall a few minutes later Tory saw the new colt. It was not yet thirty minutes old but already it was on its feet and thrusting an inquisitive nose in search of food.

"Look." Lane indicated each desirable feature. "Tail set high, and good sense in those fine eyes! Clean joints, too. And just see the silkiness of the mane and tail! If he develops well in the next two years, he'll be the winner I've been waiting for."

The colt's tar-black coat had the sheen of rippling silk. The intelligent head was wedge-shaped, with the blazed, slightly dished face characteristic of Arabians. The ears were small and active, the body shapely, slender, though even now the build showed that promise of masculine strength and determination of movement that is essential in a stud.

"What are you going to name him?" Tory was always interested in names. A name gave each animal individuality.

"Well, considering the smudge around his eyes, how about Smudge?" Lane reached over the partition and rubbed the colt's side gently. Instantly it arched a short back and lifted hind heels spiritedly, but without temper or viciousness. Lane laughed in soft exultation, and rubbed the mare's soft, nudging muzzle.

There was grim determination in the way Lane slaved that spring and summer. This year he must perform alone the many tasks with which Swif had helped, the previous year. There was no cash this year to pay for help, even if help had been available. New settlers were pouring across Saskat-

chewan and all of western Canada that spring, but each newcomer had his own problems and his own work.

And so as the daylight hours lengthened, and dawn came earlier and yet earlier with the passing of time, Lane's days lengthened, too. He rose at dawn in order to have extra time for handling the colts and rubbing down the mares, before the day's regular routine of chores and field work began. His day did not end until a long-delayed darkness spread a listening silence as thick as fur over all the prairie.

Tory's days were long, too, with a large garden to weed and many small chicks to tend. Yet when twilight came, no matter how weary she was, she felt that to be the best part of the day. Then, sinking down to sit on the edge of the sandstone slab before the door, she breathed the sharp, earthy fragrance of musky loam and the heady perfume of growing things.

Life on the prairie could have been completely satisfying—if there had not been that constant, nagging knowledge in the back of her mind of something baffling and not understood. In those evening intervals, as darkness slowly but inevitably blotted out the land, the certain chill which came with the darkness seemed to strike to Tory's very soul. That chill warned that frost could come to the prairie even at midsummer. Did it warn of something else, too?

In the brilliant morns and dazzling noons, Lane could look at his promising fields and Tory knew he felt himself unconquerable. But when sundown brought dark reminders of past things, Tory was haunted by the fear that perhaps the sag of her husband's shoulders came from dark things in his mind, things quite apart from the routine worries of crops and fields, of horses and fences.

These last months of Tory's waiting she felt utterly alone. Melsie was friendly and sweet, but not the type of person Tory could admit into the secret recesses of her heart. Fern—she had an instinctive conviction that she could have in

Fern a real, a dear friend—if all that sickness of the past, in which the girl seemed to be involved with Lane, could be cleared up.

Yes, Fern Iverson, Tory realized, was the kind of friend she needed, if she could bring herself to unlock the reserve she held around herself.

Showers fell each night and the long, warm days were a marvel of growth. The grain put up heavy stalks and hay grew lush and tall in the coulee bottoms. This year Tory was keenly aware of the miracle of growth in everything. Growth and fulfillment was a personal thing which made her of earth and heaven together, just now.

There was growth of another kind on the prairie, too. Wagons passed with increasing frequency, bound for the vast, waiting grassland between Jarvis Prairie and the Boundary. Upon the breast of far-away hills shacks began to appear, as they did on the nearer hills, and north and south along the creek.

Everyone worked at frantic speed to get extra breaking done, to increase by that much next year's crop acreage. The spring winds drank the moisture from the earth and made breaking impossible all too soon.

A very heavy July rain brought tenderness back to the sod, and the rush of breaking plows began over again. The rain meant added bushels of fall wheat, to Lane. His hundred-and-twenty-acre field of Red Fife stood hip high, every stalk head heavy with plump kernels in the dough. He felt satisfaction for that field.

But it was a precious five-acre plot of the new Marquis strain in which he felt intense pride. He watched over that patch of growing grain with the tenderness of a father. Almost, he knew every separate stalk and leaf, as he watched the growth, measuring the development against the slower-maturing Red Fife. He knew that Marquis would be ready to harvest days before the Red Fife.

Tory walked with him, inspecting the precious grain in the evening after the rain.

"Last night's rain is worth millions to the prairie. Make a bumper crop everywhere. We'll see the day, Tory, when almost every foot of the prairie waves with wheat." A wave of his long arm encompassed half the province.

Big Jon and Fern came walking up the slope in the evening cool.

"Rain is good," Jon announced. "Good breaking again. But ox, they crawl. Two ox can pull plow. Two horses, no." He sighed.

"No, two horses can't pull a breaking plow for long," Lane agreed. "Prairie sod is too heavy for that."

"Oxen are slow," Tory agreed. She had watched the slow, slow motion of the ponderous animals many times.

"Tell you what, Jon," Lane turned quickly, "Take one of my teams to work with your grays. You've got to get as much breaking done as you can while the moisture holds. Take Socks and one of the bays along for a few days."

Tory gasped inaudibly. Once Lane had flown into a rage at Jon over an apparently trivial matter. Now he offered him one of his precious teams. That was a favor even Sandy would not have dared ask—particularly when the work to be done was galling breaking.

Numbed, caught off guard, Tory could only look and listen.

"Oh, Lane—" Fern's grateful voice broke the small, electric silence. "How very good of you! The extra breaking means so much to us. I don't know how—to thank you."

Her eyes filled with sudden tears and her hand went out in a small, involuntary gesture, to rest for a moment upon Lane's arm. In the early twilight the croaking of frogs by the creek was loud in Tory's ears as she watched Fern and Lane stare at each other. She saw Lane lift the hand away, gently, holding it for a brief instant before he put it down. With a jerk of his shoulders he turned to Jon.

"Come to the corral, Jon. We'll get the team now."

Later, Tory stood motionless in the gathering dusk, straining to hear the last faint clank of strap and buckle, as Jon and Fern walked down the long slope behind the team. It seemed to her that the fading sound was the last tangible, solid thing, and that when it was gone, her sanity would be gone, too.

Lane came, presently, and stood at her side.

"How do you feel tonight?" he asked anxiously, his shoulder close to hers, seemingly unaware of her turmoil.

How did she feel? How should she feel, when there were undercurrents of secrecy and mystery, when there was another woman in her husband's life? His question angered her beyond all reason. With a resentful gesture she turned from him and ran indoors.

He followed, still apparently not feeling her anger. He lighted the lamp on the table, pausing to slap savagely at a mosquito on his neck. Tory remained so silent that at last he glanced up inquiringly.

"Are you sure you feel all right?" Anxiety narrowed his eyes and Tory saw his hands clench on the back of a chair. "God, Tory—if anything should go wrong! It worries me to be so far from a doctor."

"What could go wrong?" she demanded irritably, and then her tongue was loosed. That she had promised herself tolerance of the things she did not understand, of Lane's strange contradictions and moods, was forgotten. Before she knew what she was saying, things which had been long suppressed in her heart came tumbling from her lips.

"What could go wrong?" she mocked, "any more than is already wrong? Seems to me you fall all over yourself doing Fern favors. Twice you promise to move that shack from across the creek up here for me. Yet Fern crooks a finger and it is hers. I spoke for you then only to help you speak for yourself. Now—Jon needs a team, so for the sake of his sweet and

patient wife he gets it. It begins to look to me as if you owed Fern Iverson something, as if—"

"That's enough." He towered over her suddenly, his face white and his hands jerking spasmodically. Before the torment in his eyes Tory fell back a step, aghast at what her words had done to him.

Bewildered and half frightened, she looked up into his face, where a muscle twitched in his cheek and the torment in his dark eyes grew. She was suddenly sorry for her anger. It was in her mind to go into his arms, once and for all to get to the bottom of the formless, possessive Thing which could rise to rule his mind at such times as this. But before the impulse fought its way through her stubborn reserve, Lane was gone. Only shock at his stricken, agonized, fierce-eyed anger remained with Tory.

It seemed only a moment before the pound of Pitch's hoofs thundering down the slope reached Tory's ears. Lane craved the release of conflict when this sickness of soul and fever of mind was on him, and Pitch offered it. Between the spirited stallion and his restless master there was a dangerous antagonism.

At times, as now, Tory sensed this, sensed, too, that the conflict would not end until one or the other triumphed—unless Lane should learn peace.

Peace—release through confession—to herself? When? Where? How to bring it about? Pitiful questions in the dark.

There came the final rocky clatter as beast and rider cleared the stream. Then all sound ended and Tory stood alone in the wan circle of lamp light, alone with regrets and contrition.

Waiting in vain through the night for Lane to return, one decision Tory did reach. Tomorrow, she was going to climb the steep side of Sentinel, and see . . .

It was a day of gentle wind. The thicket of rose and buckbrush sighed around her as she picked her way through it and stepped across the creek. It was steep going as she ad-

vanced up the rocky hill. Her feet dislodged pebbles and fist-sized stones which went jumping downward as she climbed.

Suddenly she was close to the row of trim pickets. She hesitated, half-frightened, now that she was here. A dozen steps more, and she saw the tufts of tall grass which grew around the bottom of the fence. It was like a curtain, until she took that last steep step. Then what lay within the small enclosure was before her eyes.

There was not one grave, but two. One was long, and one was short. One, then, held a child. But there were no markers; only two grass-grown mounds, two heaps of earth—inscrutable as all this terrible and hostile land.

Feeling depressed, alone and insecure, Tory turned to retrace her steps down the steep slope. The house seemed so very far away, and the bluff looked so sheer that sudden dizziness assailed her. She moved fast in quick fear. From that fear rose a desperate longing for Lane. She needed him so terribly at this moment. The stranger of yesterday, the wild-faced man who had flung away from her, was forgotten. She wanted her husband. She must never awaken that other again—never—however tormenting the mystery.

"Lane—" she breathed, panic-stricken. "Oh, Lane!" A swift and sharp pain stabbed at her back. It reached paralyzing fingers around her waist. The pain passed quickly, but with a little cry Tory began to run crazily down the bluff. There would be another pain, she knew . . . and another and another . . . Lane . . . Lane . . . LANE, WHERE ARE YOU?



Chapter 16. Tory felt she was returning through fog, over heaving, mountainous seas. Pain, danger and mysterious threats crowded upon her from every side. There was water, dangerously deep water, everywhere. She wanted to feel solid ground beneath her feet.

"Just one little drink," a voice coaxed. It was Melsie.

Tory sighed wearily and opened her eyes. The sea was not water. It was a wheat field, with the wind twisting the growing gold into long, swelling waves. No, it was a rocky slope—it was grass—tall tufts of grass—short prairie grass—

There was a small sound at her side. That sound brought everything back to her—the pain and the fear, the dreadful uncertainty and the loneliness.

The sound made her understand that she was safely in her own bed, with Melsie smiling down at her in encouragement. How marvelous it was to be safe!

Where was her husband?

"Lane?" Her voice was so weak she could scarcely hear it herself. But there was nothing weak about the swift, poignant need she felt for Lane. She needed him close, needed the quick, reassuring pressure of his strong fingers.

"He's waitin' outside. He's bin like a wild man. Eat some of this gruel, then he can come in." Melsie poked a spoon at her. Tory opened her mouth obediently.

"You got a pritty little girl," Melsie crooned.

"A—a girl? Lane wanted a boy." She found it hard to keep silly tears back. Why was she weeping? She had wanted a

girl herself. She felt an odd, emotional emptiness which somehow went with the new flatness of her body. The doubts and despair of recent days seemed unreal and shadowy.

"I want to see Lane." She pushed away the spoon. Nothing in the world mattered now, except that.

He came in then, looking worried and hollow-eyed. There was a smudge of dark beard against his cheeks. In his white face his eyes burned tragically. He fairly stumbled across the room to the bedside, and Melsie went out.

"Darling, I didn't know it would be so soon. I would not have left you, if I had known. You believe that, don't you?" His voice broke and suddenly he was weeping.

It was terrible to see a man weep. Seeking to comfort him, and to ease the torment in his eyes, Tory's hand fluttered to rest upon his head as he buried his face in the coverlet.

"I wanted you," she whispered softly, thinking that it would ease his self-reproach to know that.

"I—I failed you. I always fail everybody," he protested. "I should have been here, and I was not—"

"Let us forget—everything that's past," Tory said swiftly then. His suffering was more than she could bear. "I don't want to hear or think of it any more than you do."

"There is something you have a right to know." He forced out the words. "I should have told you when first you came. But I—I thought things which—made a fire in my head—made me fear horribly I was going mad."

The torment, the grim misery, the illness in his eyes! What could have happened in the past that could matter so much now after all? The glory of their first days together came back to her.

"Don't tell me," she whispered, in weakness yet with strength, her fingers against his lips. "Don't tell me. I don't want to hear, I really don't, any more."

She believed that, then, believed that she did not want to

know what had troubled him. It was not Fern, so nothing mattered but whatever would give him peace.

The baby stirred and wailed. The sound was thrilling music to Tory.

"Look, her hair is so soft and fuzzy." She found it an effort to keep her voice steady and her mouth from twisting.

Lane looked at the child. A tiny, star-like hand waved uncertainly. The gesture was curiously appealing. Lane thrust a finger out. The small hand closed over it tightly.

"She's soft as a—chinook wind," he said gently. "What shall we call her?"

"Do you like Patricia?" Tory said.

"Sure, if you like it. I'll call her Pat." A smile lightened his haggard face.

"Oh, not a nickname, Lane! Pat is a boy's name."

"A farm is the place for a boy. She'll grow up to be my right-hand man." He laughed a little. "Hey, how about that?" he nudged the baby, carefully, tenderly, "How about that, my little pony?"

From that moment, his child was always "Pony" to Lane Jarvis.

Tory felt strength flowing back into her. All was right with her world, more than ever before.

Before Tory was out of bed, harvest was on. The wheat which had stood so thick on the well-worked fields fell steadily before the harvester, as, hour after hour in the autumn heat, Lane drove it around and around the field. Each sheaf was fat, heavy; every grain in the plump heads was full and hard. Prime number one wheat it was.

Lane cut the grain by day and stooked the precious sheaves by moonlight. This grain meant comfort and conveniences; it meant that debts could be paid. It meant fences for the slope, too.

With homesteaders pouring in, fences would soon be a necessity. The survey lines which marked the gently rolling

townships into sections and quarter sections were becoming now forbidding boundaries which were inexorably banishing the unlimited grazing space Lane had known in the earlier years. The new settlers needed the grass for their own stock.

Exultant as Lane was, as he slaved with the harvest, it was when he harvested the small patch of precious Marquis wheat that Tory saw in his eyes that certain light of future conquest. Always, it seemed, his gaze was fixed on distant goals.

The yield of the small plot exceeded even his highest hopes.

"I'll have a big field of this, next year. Ten years from now everyone will use Marquis entirely. The strain has whipped early frost threat forever!" He held one of the extra long heads, gloating over the stronger stalk and the added grains it supported.

Tory smiled fondly with him. "It's a second child to you, Lane."

"Something like that."

"Well, then—to me, too—our baby, Marquis."



Chapter 17. In March, toward the end of Tory's second winter on the prairie, a strong Chinook wind blew a warm breath from beyond the Rockies. In less than three days it bared the fields and uncovered every hill and south slope, though tough gray drifts held their ground around stack and house and barn.

On the south side of the house, sheltered from the wind, the sun was warm. Thick frost melted from the window panes for the first time since November. It made tiny rivulets across Tory's floor. She ignored them, and stood gazing down across the fields and hills.

How different it all looked to her now that each knoll and hollow were known to her. The coulee had an open, wide appearance and the snowbanks lingering on the sheltered side of each hill and along the base of the bluff seemed to belong there. Tory looked at the summit of Sentinel. Surely she had been a very foolish girl to fear that hill and its shadows!

She put the baby, now eight months old, down for a nap, and stepped out into the mild day. She wished she had ordered her flower seeds from Eaton's. The soil in the bed under the window was warm and dry. A hen scratched there now, clucking contentedly. Tory stirred the earth with her fingers, remembering that at home now wall flowers would be blooming along the walks.

Rover barked in greeting as Sandy walked into the yard.

"Wish I had my flower seeds," Tory said when he reached her.

Sandy shook his head. "Spring isna here yet. Easter is a month away. Late Easter means late spring."

"But the ground is so warm. And the fields are bare. Look at the mud in the yard!" she ended triumphantly.

"But under that mud the frost still holds like rock. Try to thrust this stick down, if ye dinna believe me. Six feet of frost canna melt away in three days. We'll have snow that deep yet." He extended a hand above knee level.

Sandy was right. A week later a wet blizzard flung three feet of snow across the prairie and hung yard-long icicles from the eaves. Frost thickened on the window pane again. A year earlier, Tory would have been sick at the delay of spring. Now she was too busy to fret.

In the crowded room where they had made a place for the cradle Lane built, she was fully occupied with washing small garments, mending larger ones, and making new things for growing Patricia. There was change in her feeling for the prairie. Not that she liked it, yet. But there was the feeling she was a small part of it.

There was change on the prairie, too. New shacks along the horizon in every direction were ending the isolation as settlers poured across the provinces to file upon homesteads—one hundred and sixty acres of good prairie land which the Canadian Government gave in exchange for a ten-dollar filing fee!

East of Melsie's place an American, Jack Hildrick, built a home for his family. South of Sandy, Chastek, a Pole, lived in a sod shack with his family of seven. Chastek and his half-grown sons built sheds of grass and sod for their stock.

It was good to look across the land and see thin columns of smoke rising straight into the still and frosty morning air. Seeing those signs of neighbors and an end to the lonely months, Tory could wait for Easter patiently. Yet after that late blizzard, she wondered how all that new snow could possibly melt away in time for wheat seeding to begin.

Waiting had its excitement, too. Newcomers continued to arrive. Homesteading looked like "easy land" from a distance. All you had to do was pay a ten-dollar filing fee, build a habitable house, live in it for at least six months out of each year, and each season break a certain portion of the promising sod.

In return for this, the land would in due time give back a stream of golden grain. In three years the land would be yours, and so would the drought and the frost and the hail, as well as the countless stones which lurked just under the crust of the tough old sod.

Those rocks blunted plowshares, jolted a man rudely, and wore galling shoulder sores under horses' collars. The wind and the pitiless sun tried men's souls. To succeed as a homesteader you had to have perseverance and utter disregard for discouragement. You had to have a love for the land. You needed a faith in some power above your own, or the years ground you to madness, made of you a primitive animal, living in the flesh alone.

A German with his foreign-speaking wife and three children moved that spring onto the rugged land immediately north of Lane's creek slope. Herman Schultz had not finished his shack before he was out marking the boundaries of his land with tall, emphatic stakes. One of these stakes was in the middle of the big waterhole which marked the northwest corner of Lane's land.

West of the German a Swede, Ole Nystrom, settled. He was a tall, angular man, and his shock-headed thirteen-year-old son camped with him while he built his shack.

Just before Easter he drove back to Flatland for the rest of the family. When he returned, it would have saved him two miles after the long journey to cut across Herman's land from a point behind the ridge. But already Herman had a single wire strung on widely spaced posts, and at intervals crudely lettered signs read KEEP OUT.

Ole's wagon, piled high with household effects, broke down just as he was passing the Jarvis place. Lane went to offer aid, and Tory invited stout Mrs. Nystrom and her two half-grown children in to the warmth of the fire while the men made repairs.

Instantly liking the placid Swedish woman and her flaxen-haired boy and girl, Tory hurried to make tea.

"My, you got it nice here." Emma Nystrom admired the cheery room and the bright embroidered curtains. She inspected the pictures on the walls and exclaimed at the gingham shelf ruffles. She took the Belleek cup Tory handed her.

"Yust like egg shell, so t'in," she marvelled, sipping the tea as daintily as her two hundred pounds allowed.

"Let me hold it once, Ma," young Lena whispered. "Just once."

"Now, you might drop, so—" Emma's eyes reproved the girl. "Yust look, ain't it enough?"

Tory gave the girl a cup and was rewarded by a radiant smile from the wide blue eyes, just as Patricia woke from her nap.

Mrs. Nystrom looked about in surprise. Somehow her sharp eyes had missed the cradle.

"You got baby, too? My ain't it sveet!" she cooed softly.

"Do come over often, Mrs. Nystrom," Tory urged as the family drove on an hour later. Tory was learning that on the prairie one accepted people as they were, and that kindness and understanding were the same in any language.

By Easter Sunday, a week later, mud was almost hub-deep on the trails. Crocuses spread a thick blue carpet down the slopes. That day Tory's house was full. Swif and Melsie and Sandy came to dinner. The Nystroms came, too. Fourteen-year-old Lena looked after young Tim, who was a year and a half old now. Thirteen-year-old Lars tagged the men around the yard and barns.

Dinner was served in relays, for the house could not be

stretched. The men ate at the first table. Tory squeezed a plate in at one corner for Lars, who beamed at being promoted from the women's table to follow.

The men filed out into the sunshine to discuss soil and weather. Emma quickly washed plates while Tory made fresh tea. Melsie moved to re-set the table. Emma reproved her kindly.

"You yust take it easy, next two, t'ree months. I come help you, yes, when time come? My Lena keep house gude. You t'ink about Yune?"

"Maybe first part of July," Melsie replied.

Emma nodded. "Iss gude time. No cold for baby then. But plenty mosquito. You got to watch," she admonished firmly.

Later, Tory brought the teapot around the second time.

"More tea, Melsina?"

In spite of her temporary bulk, Melsie appeared childish. She held up her cup, looking serene, happy. Swif was good to her and little Tim. The deep passion between Melsie and Swif had this calm, bright surface always.

"Tea tastes so good in a pretty cup," the girl cried softly.

Tory smiled. It made her happy to have the house full of guests, and it pleased her that the women admired her nice things and enjoyed tea from the fine china, though there was not as much of that as there had been. She had a set of stouter dishes now, but accidents usually happened to the fragile Belleek.

If the women liked Tory for her gentleness, the men liked Lane for his flamboyant confidence in the land they did not yet know. His numerous barns and fenced corrals gave his farm a prosperous and permanent appearance each of them hoped to achieve in time.

As the women sipped their tea the men's voices came in at the open window.

"Ay t'ank we have kids enough for skule," Ole said, in his flat Swedish accents. "My Lars and Lena, har, them Hild-

rick' kid, down east. Five Polak kid, south—what we do, Yarvis?"

"Send in a petition," Lane declared. "We'll draw up an outline of the district, state the number of children. I'll donate land, there across the creek. That little flat, south of the bluff."

"Das gude place. Middle of district," Ole agreed. "Road be grade there, some time. Water close. We all help build skule. I'm carpantar in Old Country."

In a group the men moved away from the house and down Lane's plowed field where soon wheat would be drilled. They lifted the soil, held it cradled in palms like precious gold for a moment, then allowed it to sift down again.

At sundown the Nystroms made ready to depart. The last rays of the sun slanted across the yard as Ole brought the wagon up. It took both Sandy and Lane to help Emma up over the wheel and into the seat. The woman sank down with a great sigh, and smiled at Tory.

"Was gude dinner, Miz Yarvis. You come see me, yes?"

"Indeed I will," Tory promised. It had been a satisfying day, and they stood in the late sunlight, Swif behind Tory and Lane, Melsie and toddling Timmie at his side. Nystrom took up the reins. The children waved vigorously.

"Gude bye. Gude bye," Emma shouted.

At that instant the sun dropped behind the bluff. For the first time that spring, with a swiftness which wrung a gasp from Tory, the shadows of the pickets reached the farm.

"What make them queer stripe?" Emma demanded, the farewell gesture of her plump arm interrupted abruptly.

There was a moment when no one spoke, while Emma looked from one to the other of those standing there. Tory's eyes widened at Lane's frozen expression and suddenly blank eyes. She smiled reassuringly and her heart leaped at his response—a twisted smile, but a smile.

Then flying hoofbeats ended all tension as Luck, finding

the barn door ajar, dashed headlong across the yard. Sandy, Lane and Swif ran to turn the frisky two-year-old back. But Luck shied and wheeled gleefully around house and wagon, and among the farm implements, with high-held head and streaming tail.

"Melsie, take Timmie indoors, quickly," Tory commanded, snatching off her apron to wave in the colt's face. The colt wheeled again, just as Lane reached for her halter. It was a game, a drama which went on endlessly between the colt and her master. Tory had long been aware of the situation. Though Lane could fondle the other colts he could seldom touch Luck.

Now as the colt turned, Lane's tight lips told Tory how it goaded him that the colt would not submit to his hand. But this was normal. His sickness of the moment before was gone as he dashed after Luck again, panting, shouting, with Swif and Sandy trying, too.

As suddenly as the chase had begun it was over. Luck trotted up to nuzzle Tory playfully, in search of the sugar Tory sometimes gave her. Tory caught at her halter. Lane ran up. Her eyes smiled into his. His hand caressed hers as he reached for the halter strap.

A rider was loping along the trail from the ridge. It was Steve, one of the Chastek boys. He lifted a hand in salute to the group standing around Luck, and dismounted, turning to loosen and lift his saddle a moment.

"Where've you been?" Lane stroked the damp withers of the horse.

"Weyburn," Steve replied. "There's talk that we'll have a railway out here before fall. Surveyors are moving out from the Soo Line."

The news was intoxicating to Lane.

"A railway through this south country! That's all we need! We have everything else! Space, good land, plenty of grass for stock! And now we can reach the big markets!"

"Aye, that'll mean grain elevators, implement dealers, stores," Sandy agreed.

"A blacksmith shop, a livery stable," Swif added, "Mebbe a place to buy ice cream. Melsie's never had a soda."

"A post office," Tory said. That was what a town meant to her. It meant, too, an end to those long treks to Flatland for coal, sugar, and other supplies. It meant the end of prairie isolation.

"Tell us how far they've got," Lane commanded Steve. "You can't tell too much. This is the greatest thing ever happened to the prairies!"

Tory was happy with him. She had never seen Lane freer of the cloud on his mind.



Chapter 18. When she looked down across the fields that windy spring Tory could scarcely believe she was beginning her third summer on Jarvis Prairie! Now she knew every hollow and every rounded slope down the miles of coulee visible from her window. Beyond that shouldering hill south of Sandy's the Chasteks lived. Just over the horizon behind Melsie's were the Hildricks. Some miles back from them were other newcomers whose names Tory did not know.

More exciting still, this spring numerous bright dots on the distant and sunlit Dirt Hills showed settlement there, too. Progress was marching swiftly down the prairie trails.

Tory was beginning to understand the land, as she understood the different motives which had brought the settlers from Poland and Sweden, from England and Ireland, from Ontario, from Germany and the United States. Each sought a different thing, and yet all lived by the same worries in this new land. Crop anxiety, frost fear, or the dread of drought harried them all. If there was no harvest there was no relief from the desperately pressing lack of cash for another year.

The first week in May someone brought out from Flatland the electrifying news that the King was dead. Farmers gathered in knots on the trails and in field corners for discussion, of course. But after all it made little difference to them, really, whether their sovereign was called Edward VII or George V. In that summer of 1910 the new railway survey was infinitely more exciting news to prairie homesteaders. That was vital to every home.

The women of the neighborhood saw to it that the petition for the school went in. By the time breaking was put by that summer, approval for the school was granted. Lane and Sandy hauled the lumber for the building out from Flatland, about the time Melsie's second baby came. Mrs. Nystrom cared for her, and Tory kept little Tim.

The spring had been golden with promise, like all prairie springs. Right after seeding there was a light shower or two, but after that, no rain.

At first the men joked about the dryness. But gradually the jokes were replaced by a grim-lipped silence, and greetings were sober nods. The wheat ceased to grow. Drought-stunted, it waved in the hot wind, and gradually the verdant lush green of thriving wheat faded.

Working early and late with crops and colts, Lane grew irritable. Tory knew now that his summers would always be like that—a mounting tension built by the uncertainty of the harvest. Even his early enthusiasm about the coming of rails could not dispel his worry. What use was a railway if you were going to have no grain to haul away, and no money with which to buy the things it brought?

But rain or no rain, crop or no crop, work on the new school went forward. Ole Nystrom directed the raising of the framework on a small flat between the creek and the shack where Fern and Jon lived. Two weeks later, the windows were in and the floors were laid, and everyone knew there would be classes there the coming autumn.

Mrs. Nystrom, who came frequently to spend an hour or two with Tory, walked up the slope one windy afternoon after inspecting the almost finished building.

"Iss gude to have skule for kids," she said softly. "I vant they have shance, like I never got. Ve call this Yarwis Skule?" she suggested.

"I bane think, Tory," Emma went to the point at once, "Maybe ve have shurch in skule, sometime? Sing and pray

a little, Bible lesson for shildren? Ve need shurch on Yarwis Prairie."

"Oh, that would be fine," Tory agreed quickly, thinking of Sunday school for year-old Patricia and two-year-old Timmie. "But where would we get a minister?"

"New family behind the bluff," Emma explained eagerly. "The little girl tell my Lena her papa preach in Ontario. He preach for us, maybe? I glad ve got skule, so kids not grow opp dumbheads, and—" Emma's ideas came fast. "Vhat you think, we have harvest supper to open skule? Make fry shicken, pie, cake, maybe Swedish cookie?"

Tory had never heard the Swedish woman say so much at one time. Emma's earnest sincerity touched her and all at once she realized how, in little more than four months, the woman had already made a place for herself in the community. She had been mid-wife for Melsie, she had walked the three miles to the Chasteks weeks before when sickness had come to the family—and now she was planning a festival!

"I think that is a splendid idea!" Tory declared. "That way we will get to meet everyone, and—"

"You sing so gude," Emma leaned forward, put a hand on Tory's knee. "Maybe, yes, you learn shildren song, for little concert? You sing so *gude*," she coaxed.

"But—hōw would I get all the children together?" The Hildricks lived two miles beyond Melsie. It was three miles to the Chasteks. Others in the district were as far away.

"I send my Lars horseback. Tell them come for practice. They come quick, I bet." Emma was eager, enthusiastic.

The next morning Lars rode around with word of a concert practice for the children in the community. That afternoon Tory had a caller. Steve Chastek drove over, bringing his mother.

Tory went out as the spring wagon stopped before her door, and smiled up at the gaunt and prematurely aged woman on the seat.

"My mother speaks not much English," Steve offered gravely as he helped the stooped woman to the ground. Tory stepped up and shook hands heartily, noting that the dark eyes, so like Steve's, were still alert and beautiful. Once, Tory thought, she must have been a very handsome woman.

"Do come in." She led her visitor into her crowded house, made her comfortable in a small rocker which had been Tory's Christmas gift from Lane the previous winter. But she was a trifle puzzled as she pushed the kettle forward. How did one entertain a visitor who could not speak one's language?

"You like—here?" Mrs. Chastek's gesture included the whole of the vast province. Her words were broken, but Tory understood. She nodded, smiling.

"Me, too. Here, peace." The woman's eyes glowed fervently. "My countree, war—war—ever'—what you say?—generation? War bring famine, death. My boys go school, be Canadians."

The sheer earnestness of the woman's words made Tory's lids smart. She had not yet seen the pitiful poverty in which this family lived while they got a start in a land of freedom. She had heard, however, that while each boy took his turn with the one plow they possessed, the others used spades, doggedly turning up the age-old sod to assure a few more yards of grain for the following year.

But Tory did understand now what the prairie land they had homesteaded meant to these newcomers. And she understood, too, the reason for the woman's call today. Her children had been invited to come to Tory's house for a practice, but their mother had come first to make sure that Tory's house was a fit place for her children to come.

Serving tea in the two remaining Belleek cups, she smiled at the woman and her heart warmed to all strangers in a new land. After her guests had driven back across the grass toward their home, Tory felt humble and proud at the same time.

Suddenly the meaning of the new land reached beyond the visible horizons.

Tory fanned herself. "Try it over again, all together," she said mechanically, trying to keep her mind on the old words, "Bringing in the Sheaves." The words were mockery when the fields were drying up again, when hot winds incessantly scorched the earth.

The children tried valiantly to keep the tune for her, but they looked hot and wilted. She went to the water pail. It was empty. Thank goodness the well had not failed yet. Surely another summer like that first one would not be possible. Another crop failure would be disastrous. No harvest, no money. No addition to the house. If Fern had not come back—in the heat she felt her old resentment against her neighbor returning.

"Lars, will you bring in some fresh water, please? We all need a cool drink."

The agile, shock-headed boy went out, but came bouncing back instantly, eyes wide with excitement.

"There's men measuring the land down south of Sandy Cameron's place! They're lookin' through funny poles."

The long-awaited surveyors for the new railway had come. In the following days the whole community traced the surveyed route from white stake to white stake, along the edge of the swamp below Chasteks, across the creek to skirt the south boundary of Jon Iverson's land, then west beyond the bluff. The surveyors went on, leaving their exciting markers through the Dirt Hills, and on across the rolling country toward Alberta.

"Construction next, then rails and trains," Lane declared as he and Tory drove homeward one evening after tracing the route of the survey. "Pioneer days are over! Some enter-

prising merchant will move in to build a store soon, and a new town will be started."

"I should think they'd wait until the railroad marks a place for a town," Tory remarked.

"Shrewd business men don't wait. They get in on the ground floor. Some build a store in half a dozen towns. If the farmers prosper, a smart merchant can make a fortune."

"If this heat keeps up there will be no prospering for anyone," Tory replied gloomily.

"Oh, I'm sure it'll rain yet." Lane had not given up hope that other year, either, until long after everyone else knew certainly that the dried-up grain was beyond all help. Now he clung to the dogged notion that somehow the wheat field would come through to an adequate harvest. But Tory understood surely that it would not, that this year again there would be no crop and no money, and that for another year they would have to go on living in the crowded shack.

Riding along the dusty trail now, Tory thought wistfully of England's cool green lanes and the security a salaried job gave. There was no waiting for uncertain returns from fickle seasons there, if one belonged to the great working army.

One August day when the dried-out wheat was being mowed for fodder, a strange sound rose above the wind and the noisy clatter of the mower. Everyone on Jarvis Prairie stopped, in field and yard and house, and looked up toward the north ridge, from where the sound came. A strange vehicle without horses was buzzing rapidly down the road.

It was the first automobile ever to come over that rutted and uneven trail. It sped past Swif Shannon's place, past Tory's window and went on to cross the creek. Tory saw the goggled driver sitting stiffly behind the wheel and wondered who the man was and where he was going.

That last question Swif answered when he returned from Jon Iverson's later that day. The automobile had stopped along the railroad survey south of Jon's and it glittered in

the prairie sun a long time while the driver paced off distances.

Swif was bulging with the news when he passed on the way home.

"The man said he was hunting a store site. Figures to build a store in every other town along this line."

"Where was he from?" Lane asked.

Swif shrugged idly. What did it matter, if they were going to have a store and a town?

"Somewhere East, I guess. Only an Easterner would have money enough to build a dozen stores. He's sandy-haired and sharp, but pleasant enough to talk to."

Not long after, three loads of lumber from Flatland passed one afternoon while Tory was at work in her garden. It was unloaded on the spot where the stranger had paused. Though the place was almost two miles from Tory's window, she could see the bright new boards being piled together. When the wagons passed on their return, one of the drivers paused to talk to Lane.

As soon as the wagon drove on, Lane hurried in to Tory.

"There's hauling for all the teams we want to put on the trail! Lumber and coal and supplies waiting to be brought out. Other business men are coming."

"Then we'll get mail oftener!" Tory still felt that trips to Flatland meant only that.

"Yes. But every trip will mean hard cash, which is lucky, considering there is going to be no crop this year. And the Government has promised a post office for the new town as soon as there is a building to house it. The store will be ready for business in less than a month, but everything must be hauled overland until the rails come through."

A post office less than two miles from her door! How fast the prairie was shrinking! Tory was almost too busy to give it full appreciation. The children were coming for another practice this afternoon. In three weeks the new school would be opened with a Harvest Festival.



Chapter 19. During the next three weeks, while Tory drilled the restless children on the songs and short dialogues they would give for the Harvest Festival entertainment, lines of wagons passed daily, bearing lumber to the new town.

The stark skeleton of a store building was first to lift its bones against the sky. Before the high false front was finished half a dozen other buildings had been begun. By the time the words GENERAL MERCHANDISE appeared there in bold black paint, a dozen tents and tarpaper shacks were sprawled around the town site.

Several times in those weeks that glistening automobile buzzed past Tory's door, trailing a funnel of dust in its wake, as the owner of the store watched progress of the building, and saw that the wagonloads of freight—bales of drygoods, boxes of tinned goods and groceries—were placed on the new shelves.

Every farmer on Jarvis Prairie who had a team and wagon was hauling freight, fuel and lumber to the new town. Sandy, Big Jon, Hildrick, Lane and Herman Schultz made trip after trip to Flatland, as a restaurant, a blacksmith shop and another store went up. A livery barn took shape. Ole Nystrom did not need to haul freight. He was boss carpenter of the town. The farmers did not miss the crop that had failed that year.

Perhaps it was only coincidence that the date of the Harvest Supper was the same as the opening of the store. Tory, busy with the children and the task of doing her share of food pre-

paration for the Festival, had little time to think about the store.

She had not seen the new storekeeper. She heard Lena and Laura Hildrick whispering about him during their last rehearsal.

"The new storekeeper tole Ma he's coming to the concert," Lena declared. "Said he'd get to know everybody right away."

"Pa," Laura whispered back, "says he ain't married."

"He must be awful rich, ridin' around in one of them auty-mobiles." Lena sighed enviously.

"I saw him yesterday," Sonia Chastek had the trump. "He's a mustache, kinda light hair. He's real nice manners, too."

Tory heard this in snatches as she hurried the children through their songs. There was still a great deal to do. The new room, with its smell of new lumber and of paint, had to be decorated, and the plank seats put in position beside the long supper tables.

And of course the fried chicken and the buns, the pies and the pickles and the layer cakes and potato salad, had to be brought from her kitchen and all the other kitchens on Jarvis Prairie to be placed on those tables along with the beautiful, fresh-baked loaves of bread Melsie and Emma and Mrs. Chastek made.

The one persistent fear of the day for Tory was that the hours would not be long enough to complete all the details. Lena and Laura brought sheaves of wild asters from along the coulee. Sonia found a few last gold and scarlet leaves in the brush. Emma trimmed lamp and lantern wicks and polished chimneys. When everything was in readiness at last she stood back and beamed at the loaded tables.

"Yust like city shurch supper! Ain't it nice, though? Lars, you know your piece now?" she demanded anxiously.

"They'll all do splendidly, I'm sure," Tory reassured her.

"They are all very clever. How pretty Lena looks in that new blue dress." Lena was slender, and long flaxen braids almost reached her knees. Tory threw an arm about the girl affectionately as they stood together.

"If Lena, now, get some of your nice manners, then she's smart girl," Emma approved. "That dress, now, I didn't see it before."

Tory had taken from the bottom of her trunk a dress she had not worn since leaving England. It was a soft rose *peau-de-soie* with a deep lace yoke; a little out of date, perhaps, but elegant, nevertheless. The color became Tory's delicate coloring and complemented the rich glow of her brown hair. Under Emma's admiring glance Tory felt herself flush.

Lane had come up just in time to hear Emma's remark. His eyes brightened in swift appreciation.

"Gad, Tory, you're beautiful in that dress. If I didn't know you had a daughter, I'd think you were about seventeen—or maybe only sixteen—and had never been kissed!" He kissed her, suddenly but thoroughly. The women laughed.

"Oh, you—I—" she stammered in confusion. "Lane—"

His name turned to a lump in her throat. He so seldom said things like that. She could cry with happiness. Instead, she grasped his shoulders and lifted her face to be kissed again. He held her close a moment. They could still have wonderful moments.

Emma clapped her hands. "Yust like a play!" she cried.

The crowd began to gather. Fern and Jon brought their contribution to the already overloaded tables. The Hildricks arrived, and Herman Schultz with his stolid wife and children. Tory gathered the children behind the makeshift curtain as fast as they came, giving them last-minute instructions and encouragement.

Beyond the curtains, which were two bedspreads strung on a wire across the end of the room, Tory heard the buzz of half-whispered conversation as newcomers arrived. Sonia

put her bright black eyes to the slit between the curtains and turned back to report excitedly.

"The new storekeeper just came in! And the man who has the livery barn. His wife's fat, and they've got a little girl!"

Tory scarcely heard the girl. She was counting noses swiftly. Where was Lars? She turned in panic. Lars was the key performer tonight.

"Oh, here you are." Relief flooded her as the lad appeared. "Got your mouth-organ ready, Lars?"

"It's a new one. Sent to Eaton's for it." He displayed the gleaming, nickled instrument. It had an arrangement of two flat bells on one side. Tory nodded in approval. This was the only musical instrument there was on Jarvis Prairie.

"It looks nice, Lars. Lena, you will lead the line right across the platform, when the time comes. Remember, get the first note right, not too high. All ready now?"

Keeping herself out of sight, Tory drew the curtain. A hush fell over the crowd. For a moment there was a panic-stricken pause while the children gulped back fright. Then their voices lifted nobly, in number after number. There was a chorus, and then a duet by Lena and Sonia. There was a drill, with the smaller children marching back and forth in intricate pattern, and then the dialogue. The grand finale was a chorus over which Tory had worked hard. The children sang with gusto, while Max Hildrick whistled the air clear and high, like the laughter of a sun-kissed wind. Lars blew his mouth harp mightily as the words filled the stark new room.

*"O Canada! Our home, our native land,
Loyal and free, beneath thy flag we stand!
With chains of love thou hast bound us,
Thy winds have made us strong,
Our eyes have seen thy golden fields,
To thee we raise our song."*

On the chorus the young voices rose exultantly, reminding Tory of the first time she had heard the song, when Lane had sung it as they came over that north ridge to her first glimpse of Jarvis Prairie. She lifted her own voice now to add to the chorus:

*"O Canada! Our prayer shall be,
God bless and guard thee, keep us true to thee!
—keep us true, true to thee!"*

Behind the curtain, Tory was suddenly weak with relief and weariness. The applause seemed to echo in her heart, "Thy winds have made us strong—made us strong." Those words reminded her of Lane. He always sang it "my home, my native land."

The concert was over. Emma would have coffee ready, and the fried chicken heaped high on hot platters. Tory commended the children as she smiled dismissal. Lane's tall figure was working its way through the crowd toward her. A shorter man followed. The stranger half turned back and all she saw was the bulge of a shoulder, an arm. She was looking anxiously at Lane.

"How was it, from out front?" she demanded.

"Just fine! Just fine. Here, Tory—" Lane reached back for the man behind him, "I've brought our first business man to meet you. This is the new storekeeper, Mr. Watts."

Tory gasped incredulously. It was not possible that out of all the width of Canada, Harry Watts had selected Jarvis Prairie and the country beyond for his chain of stores! But here he was, extending his hand in hearty surprise.

"Victoria! I have the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Jarvis," he explained to Lane. "We—well, we knew each other back Home." His emphasis capitalized the word, as Tory herself unconsciously did whenever she spoke of England.

"I—how—what—" She put out her hand, but there was nothing coherent in her mind or on her tongue.

"Surely I deserve a better greeting than that." He held her hand firmly.

The way Lane's genial smile froze told Tory that he was struck now by the idea that the new storekeeper was the man from Winnipeg. But she could not read what flared in his dark eyes. At that moment Emma bustled up to them.

"Concert was gude. Supper iss ready now. Come—" She paused, uncertain if she should include the fresh-faced man beside Tory.

"Harry," Tory said, "Sit with us, tell us why you picked this part of the west for your stores. I thought you had a good business in Winnipeg."

"I still have it," Harry replied. "But things will boom on the prairie for the next ten or fifteen years. There is going to be money in general stores."

As they reached the long table, Lane, trailing uncertainly behind Tory, reached forward and took hold of her arm. The gesture looked natural enough, but the half painful pressure of his strong fingers through the long sleeve of her dress angered her unaccountably. She resented his jealousy and the fierce possessiveness that was in it.

"Sit here beside me." She turned and smiled radiantly at Harry. "You must come out and see us. Have dinner with us next Sunday? I have a small daughter now, you know. I want you to see our hilltop farm, and I want to hear what news you've had from Home."

"Do you want some of this fried chicken?" Lane asked in her ear savagely. She felt the tenseness in his shoulder next to hers.

"No. I—I'm not a bit hungry," she declared, turning with sparkling eyes to Harry Watts. He was England—Home.

She and Harry were still talking earnestly when the crowd began to thin out, much later. They had compared notes on their letters from England, spoken of his relatives and hers. Lane's face grew darker by the minute. This was talk which

shut him away from Tory. She felt he was jealous more of England than of Harry. Lane was so sure of her in that way.

"Fancy you on a prairie farm," Watts said at the end of the evening. "I—how do you like it?" He had not said what he began to say, Tory felt sure.

Lane's hand closed on her arm. "We're going now."

Tory resented the roughness in his voice. Her beautiful lips set mutinously above her stubborn chin. When they drove away from the new schoolhouse into the darkness of the prairie night, she sat straight and rigid beside Lane.

The team, feeling the anger which was in Lane, jumped forward with a jerk which threw Tory back into the seat. She jerked up again, and they rode in complete silence until the buggy rattled over the new bridge at the creek crossing, making a loud and hollow sound.

"God, you didn't have to fall all over the—the fop," he said then with explosive passion.

"You didn't have to haul me away, either, as if—as if I were a—a—" A word strong enough would not come to her mind. She choked impotently, resentment rising until it possessed her completely. Lane should pay for that moment when he had grasped her arm and almost forcibly led her away from Harry Watts—as if she were some irresponsible child who was behaving improperly!

"I've invited him to dinner Sunday." Tory spoke calmly but with a hard edge on her voice. The ensuing silence was grim. In Tory resentment grew.

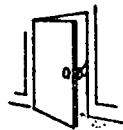
Before their door Lane turned to help her out. Perversely she scorned his extended hand and flounced to the other side of the buggy. But in the darkness she missed the buggy step. Her weight slumped. The skirt of the rose silk caught on the dashboard. There was a ripping sound. She caught herself, unhurt, but the dress was ruined.

And the beauty of the fragile moment when she and Lane had been so close, when Tory had felt hope spring that per-

haps she was winning against the barrier between them—such happiness was gone for tonight. Lane made no effort to bring it back to her.

All night she lay wakeful and rigid at Lane's side, knowing him to be sleepless, too, longing to reach out and touch him—but fear was growing in her mind now. Was this thing which drove Lane only a temporary illness of the mind? Would it, in time, wear itself out? Or would it feed on jealousy now as it had fed on memories?

Through the night hours Tory sought understanding of Lane, sought reasons and justifications for his behaviour. But fear that she herself might fail in understanding was a threat as real as the summer darkness and the silence of the night.



Chapter 20. The following Sunday, which was a day warm for October, Watts drove his automobile into the farm yard. Tory was dressed in the muslin she had worn to Zellman's picnic, her first summer on the prairie. She had chosen it today partly because it was becoming, but more because it reminded her of words she had overheard that day, and the doubts which had harassed her for so long. The dress helped to hold her perversity to a mutinous pitch.

Lane stood behind her shoulder in the doorway as Watts turned in at the gate. He was prepared to be civil, and as friendly as necessary. But as the car wheeled up, Watts honked loudly at a flock of chickens. They fled, squawking, and down in the long corral which stretched back from the barn, Luck and Smudge and all the others—the mares and the geldings and the heavier work horses—lifted terrified heads and went snorting along the fence, tails streaming in the wind.

"Damn fool!" Lane muttered resentfully.

His irritation brought an angry glint to Tory's eyes and heightened the flush on her cheeks. There was a new stiffness to her shoulders as she went forward to greet Harry.

Tory sparkled that day as Lane had never seen her sparkle, while she and Harry talked of things, of places and people, back Home. The recollections were really inspiring to her. Listening to their chatter, Lane sat in complete silence, except for an occasional word to Pony.

Tory seemed too busy to notice the child at all, as a constant "Do you remember the time—" "I suppose you heard

about—" and "Did your sister tell you—?" passed between herself and Harry.

She kept Lane shut out of her mind and her heart, although knowing that the hours were, for him, slow torture. She saw the anger and frustration which darkened his face as the day wore on, saw that the cleft in his chin deepened as his lips drew tighter. She was perversely determined for once to punish him as he had so long hurt her.

Once, glimpsing the torment in his eyes, she was almost sorry for him. She remembered her resolution—but a devil seemed to be in her, driving her on. And she had a reason for yielding to it, she told herself, a real reason that Lane would understand—in time, surely . . .

"It has been a delightful day, Victoria." Harry rose regretfully, very late in the evening. His voice lingered musically on her full name. She had heard it so seldom since coming to the prairie. The name as Harry said it gave her a feeling of grace and dignity.

"You'll come again, won't you?" she begged him eagerly.

"Indeed I shall!"

Then the car growled loudly as Harry cranked it, and went roaring down the slope.

Lane faced Tory with grim fury in his smouldering eyes.

"I won't have that bowing and scraping dude coming here!"

Tory's lips set rebelliously. Her eyes were cold.

"This is *my* home, too. If I want him to come I shall ask him. You act like—"

"I act," he broke in passionately, "like any husband would act when he sees his wife making a fool of herself!"

Tory's resentment flared. "Perhaps it is too late to make a fool of myself, about three years too late!"

He jerked her about to face him then. His hands were hard upon her rigid shoulders.

"Too late?" His voice was savage with jealous anger. He jerked her again, hard against his chest. She felt a tremor in

his arms as his dark, tormented face came down over hers. He kissed her, but there was no tenderness in the kiss. It was brutal and savage and it forced her head backward against his arm, while his lips went on demanding. "Too late, eh?" he repeated fiercely.

"Lane, Lane, you're hurting me!" She tore her lips from his at last and pushed him back. She had gone too far, she thought wildly. Fear surged in her again.

"Hurting you?" His lips were upon hers again, bruising with a brutal passion which surged from the wild jealousy within him.

Tory had no intention of responding to that indecent kiss, but she found herself yielding in spite of herself, in spite of the furious anger against him which was rising in her heart.

"Stop, stop!" she cried, fear sharpening her voice. She tried to jerk out of his arms but he held her hard. The grip of his long and powerful arms hurt and bruised her flesh. Impotent tears stung her lids. Her strength was as nothing compared to his. She felt it go out of her and could not call it back.

"Stop?" Lane laughed savagely. The sound was harsh against Tory's ears. He stripped the muslin frock away from her shoulders while she fought against his strength ineffectually.

"Oh, don't," she cried weakly. But he would not relent. Then she no longer feared his strength. It possessed her—body, soul and heart. Primitive exultation flowed through her. Lane was all her own . . . now . . . this way . . . and she was his . . . his . . .

When Tory woke next morning Lane had already gone out. She lay remembering the events of the night with conflicting emotions in her breast. Her anger spent, she forced herself to remember farther than last night or the week or month before, in an attempt to bring the resentment and anger back. Her lips were set mutinously as she got out of bed.

Lane came in at that moment, stood uncertainly with his back against the closed door.

"Tory, I'm sorry about last night," he said, wearily, his eyes refusing to meet hers.

Trembling with wounded pride, her temper broke against him.

"Sorry? That is too mild a word for a—a beast! For a man without decency! I could hate you for last night. I could—"

She stopped, suddenly aware of the utter dejection in his face and the misery in his eyes. It made her sorry for him and she did not want to pity him. She wanted to hate him. She wished passionately that he would lash back at her for the words she had flung into his face.

But he opened the door, without speaking. There was complete hopelessness in the way he lifted the latch.

"I—I'm sorry," he repeated, "forgive me." He closed the door.

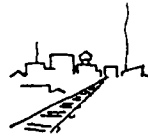
Tory stared at the closed door and the uncertainty grew in her heart. Not to meet anger, when one is angry, makes of anger something else again. She was aware of sharp conflict of emotions in herself; a little remorse for her harsh words, and self-blame for the whole affair. Lane's eyes and their misery haunted her and she did not want to be haunted by them.

Stubbornness hardened her heart. Pity for him turned into pity for herself. She remembered how much she had forgiven, how hard she had tried to reach again wonderful moments such as they had once known—in days before she had met Harry again. Lane's jealousy and brutality had ruined it all. Those were no qualities of a tortured spirit and brain sickness, she told herself. They must be of his true nature.

After that, the days slipped by—mornings, noons, evenings and nights, with complete silence between Tory and Lane. The longer that silence endured the more desperately Tory wanted to hurt Lane, hurt him cruelly, to show him his

strength could not control her thoughts. He should not have her forgiveness.

The only way she knew how to hurt him surely was to see Harry again and again. Mail came overland from Flatland to the new store once a week now. Each week Tory went after it, knowing it hurt and enraged Lane. She grew aware of the crying snipe again. She heard the lonely, half startled cry as the bird rose from the creek, crying—was it *escape—escape?*—She began hearing that word in her dreams.



Chapter 21. It was mid-November when a plan which had been in the back of Tory's mind a long time took definite form. The new town was growing as people moved in to await the coming of the rails the following year. There promised to be social life on Jarvis Prairie this winter.

So at supper one evening she broke the long silence.

"I want to drive into Flatland tomorrow. I need some new clothes."

Three years before, when Tory had arrived on the prairie behind Lane's bay team, she had been afraid of horses and knew nothing about handling them. But she was an expert driver now, and Lane had bought her a buggy after Patricia's birth the summer before.

Lane was drying his hands at the long roller towel which hung behind the door. Tory saw his back stiffen, was aware that for an instant his hands were completely motionless. There was a queer pause, in which a sound like a long-held sigh of relief escaped Lane.

"I'll drive you in." He did not turn to look at her, but went on wiping his hands, though they were already dry.

"I prefer to go alone."

"It's too long a trip for you to go alone with Pony."

"But I'm not taking Pat. Melsie will keep her."

Lane dropped the towel and came across the room then, his great shoulders looming large in the lamp light.

"This warm weather isn't to be trusted. Wait until Tuesday. I didn't like the red of the sunset tonight."

Sullen, crimson clouds had darkened the west at sundown, and a mournful wind moaned under the eaves now.

"I'm going, early in the morning," Tory declared stubbornly. "That will get me into town in time to shop tomorrow afternoon. I can be ready to start back the next morning."

Lane objected no more. He brought a large stone to place in the oven that night, ready to put, well heated, at Tory's feet in the buggy next morning. The weather had been mild for November, but one can get thoroughly chilled on a thirty mile ride, as he well knew.

Dawn was touching rose to a cold gray sky when Tory stepped into the buggy next morning. Lane tucked her in silently with a plush buggy robe on which stationary horses galloped before the forked lightning of a violent storm. He pushed the heated rock under her feet.

That finished, he stepped back, pausing to jar one of the front wheels with a hard fist. The iron rim was slightly loose on the dried-out felloe. He opened his lips to speak, then closed them again and frowned instead.

As the buggy rolled over the north ridge, Tory felt a definite bite in the slow wind. The wheels rattled loudly on the iron-hard trail. Her horse jogged forward at a steady trot. Tory settled down to listing, mentally, the things she wanted to buy in town.

This was the first time she had been back over all the Flatland trail since her arrival on the prairie. She had forgotten how long the miles were, but they were not quite so empty now as they had been two and one half years before. The land between Flatland and their own farm was of poorer quality for some miles, and settlement there had not been great.

There was a partly completed but abandoned shack close beside the trail, about five miles beyond the ridge. It was a small building, set against the base of a hill, with an open shed, evidently intended as a barn, along one side. Beyond that there was nothing for a long time, until one got within

a dozen miles of Flatland, where farm buildings appeared with increasing frequency.

In the silence, the harsh rattle of the wheels and the jingle of the loose rim began to wear on Tory's nerves. The seat grew hard and uncomfortable. She tried to forget the discomfort by going over in her mind the intended purchase list. Gingham for aprons; muslin for a white dress for Patty. Flannel for the child's winter sleepers, stockings for them all. Perhaps a new blouse for herself.

She shifted her position on the seat. The movement was unexpected agony. She was stiff with chill. The road jogged for the correction line, then headed straight into Flatland between fenced fields of stubble. Tumbling mustard was blown in an almost solid wall against the wires of every fence.

The grain elevators were gray under the autumn sky. The low station was a colorless blob beside the railway grade. The town had none of the booming bustle Tory had remembered. It looked scattered, flat. Dust blew into Tory's eyes as the buggy crossed the railroad grade and turned toward the livery stable on a back street. Now that she was here, the town seemed drab, colorless. The streets were empty except for a solitary wagon pulling away from a hitching bar at the end of the main street. She had remembered it as being full of life and activity, that morning she and Lane had driven away from it. Today it looked cramped, squalid.

Leaving her horse, she walked down the board sidewalk. It felt strange and not at all satisfying, gazing through fly-specked shop windows at uninviting, sun-bleached goods. She halted indecisively.

A man came from the saloon beyond the frame hotel and walked unsteadily toward her. His heels hit the boards unevenly. Frightened, she ducked into the store.

"I'd like to look at some stockings, and some yard goods. Something light and dainty," she told the man behind the counter.

He brought down several bolts of cloth.

"Something a little—well, a little brighter, I thought," she suggested hopefully, disappointed in the dark flannelette, the serviceable gingham and drab chambray he had brought out.

"I'm afraid this is all we have. No call for fancy stuff. Women want apron gingham, shirt chambray, something that will wear well." There was a hint of reproof in his words.

"I'll look at a blouse, then, and shoes," Tory decided.

"No blouses. Shoes right this way." He drew out a box and took from it sturdy leather boots with hooks on the uppers.

"Just the thing for farm wear," he urged as Tory turned away in distaste. "They wear well, save time lacing on a busy morning. How about overshoes?" he suggested hopefully. "Got some special four-buckle ones in last week."

Tory had no better luck at the two other general stores. They carried serviceable goods but nothing frilly. There was not a blouse in town. On the sidewalk again, bracing herself against the wintry wind, a truth dawned upon her. Prairie women did not buy their nice clothes in prairie towns. They ordered them from the enticing pages of Eaton's mail-order catalog.

All at once she longed for the farm, for the warmth and security of her own kitchen, for the sound of hoofs on slope and creek bridge. She was an alien here on the town's board walk.

She was homesick for Jarvis Prairie! And she knew—she knew the real reason she had left home was to seek a restoration of love and longing for her home, and for Lane!

"What time is it, please?" she asked a man who came from a nearby door. Her own French-enameled watch, worn on a fleur-de-lis pin at her breast, had stopped. She had seldom worn it since coming to Canada.

While the man was taking his fat timepiece from his pocket, she had a crazy notion she might start home at once. She felt

a sudden and almost overpowering need for Lane's strength, now that she was certain again of her love for him. If he had been at her side in that moment, she would have thrown herself into his arms, begging forgiveness and understanding, and all the friction and unhappiness of the last months would melt away, she felt.

But Lane was not there, and of course the horse needed a night's rest before the return journey. She must take a room at the hotel until morning. She went up the four wooden steps to the stoop which extended along the front of the new two-story brick building. The bricks increased her feeling of strangeness. She had grown used to unpainted frame structures.

Her room looked upon the street. She sat at the window looking out as darkness came. The pools of light made on the street by the shop windows failed to excite her. She longed, miserably, pathetically, to be home.

There was no sun next morning and the air was sharply cold as Tory drove out of town soon after nine. Under the steely sky the land lay in a peculiar silence. In that silence the steady clop, clop of hoofs, the monotonous rattle of the wheels, and the jangle of that loose rim were strangely loud.

Below the correction line she passed wagons which had left Flatland before dawn. The drivers sat on high seats, huddled into turned-up sheepskin collars in the cold. Tory felt kinship with those men, hauling coal and lumber and supplies bought with their wheat. She belonged to the prairie, too.

She soon left the wagons behind, yet felt her pace a crawl, in her frenzied impatience to get home to Lane. She berated herself for not being more tolerant of his arrogance. It took, she realized now, the strong to be arrogant. It might be, she mused, that his desperate silence about the graves on the hill was from the depths of his strength. She remembered how little it had seemed to mean to her compared with his love at the time of Pony's birth.

At noon she paused, so the horse might eat the grain Lane had provided for the purpose. She ate a cold lunch herself, flailing her arms to restore circulation. It was growing colder. She missed the hot stones Lane's thoughtfulness had provided for the trip in.

The loose rim began to give trouble. Twice she halted and knocked it back into place with a stone. A third time it slipped so badly she had difficulty with it. She searched the buggy box for wire, for anything with which she could secure the iron in place. There was nothing. She untied the halter rope and used it to tie rim and felloe together. Thereafter the ride was queerly bumpy, as the knot went round and round.

The sky darkened ominously. A few flakes of glass-hard snow were thrown into Tory's face. A sudden gust of strong wind breathed a polar breath on her. In the northwest there was no distance, only a gray wall that was land and sky in one. A silt of sand-like snow enveloped the buggy and turned the horse into a moving blur. Savage wind beat and swirled around Tory. The driving snow cut like a thousand needles.

The horse was laboring now, leaning against the tremendous weight of the wind. All the tales Tory had heard of death in prairie blizzards crowded into her mind. She gulped down her panic.

"Get up! Get up!" she screamed at the horse. If it could keep to the trail they might reach the safety of that abandoned shack five miles from the ridge. That would offer shelter, at least. But suppose the storm lasted two—three days? A prickle of fear ran down her spine.

Suddenly the wheel with the loose rim dropped into a gopher hole on the frozen trail. Held only by the knotted rope, the rim came off. Shaking with cold and a sudden uncontrollable terror, Tory got out and tried with trembling and numb fingers to push it on again.

The ground was white with snow now, and enough of it had packed onto the wheel to prevent the rim going back

into place. In despair Tory had to take the iron circle into the buggy. She prayed that the wooden wheel rim would withstand the frozen jolting.

It had grown incredibly cold. Every breath drawn was a sword-sharp stab into her lungs. To Tory it seemed hours that they fought forward. She strained her eyes into the blinding grayness about her, striving to find a remembered landmark. Surely, surely, they must soon reach that roadside shack!

For a long time she tried desperately to hold the horse to the trail. It seemed to her that it pulled strongly to one side. But when she turned her head, striving to see into the swirling, gray-white wall which enveloped her, the wind tore the breath from her throat and the sand-like snow cut her cheeks. With a sob of despair she turned her head away from the wind.

Vaguely she remembered hearing Lane say, "Give a horse his head in a storm." She would have to leave it to the horse. She was powerless herself.

With a sickening jerk the vehicle stopped short as the rimless wheel half lifted against a stone. There was the ominous snap of breaking wood, followed by a jolting settling of the buggy body as the wheel collapsed.

The horse halted abruptly. Tory blinked hard, feeling a sharp, chill wetness as the frost on her lashes melted against her cheek. She had been doing that regularly, she knew now, and it was a queer sensation. Whether the melting frost felt warm or cold she could not be sure, but she knew it felt good to squeeze her eyelids tight.

Then she felt, rather than saw, the shack. It was completely dark now with a strange, unnatural darkness. But something in the slightly lessened fury of the wind told her some bulk tempered it here. She cried out in sheer relief. The shack would be cold, and empty, but it would afford protection from the hurricane-like wind.

She stepped numbly out of the sagging buggy. Just then the door of the shack opened and an arm of light thrust through the swirling snow. Tory blinked again, not to rid her lashes of frost, but in sheer surprise at the figure outlined in the doorway. It was Harry Watts!



Chapter 22. "Victoria! What in Heaven's name are you doing here?" The wind caught Harry's voice and drew it out into a thin and unreal sound. Tory's arms were numb. Her feet were blocks of wood. She moved, and they caught in the robe which trailed from the buggy. Harry leaped to catch her as she fell against the crazily leaning dashboard.

"My word, but you're lucky to have reached safety!" Harry assisted her inside.

Tory was shaking violently now. She did not know if with chill, or the grueling disappointment of not reaching home, and Lane. But she understood that to go on tonight was absolutely and utterly out of the question. She was stranded here, and perhaps it was lucky that Harry was here. She doubted her ability to cope with the storm alone.

"Got—to—to get the horse inside, somewhere," she gasped.

"I'll get it in the shed beside my machine." Harry was unbuttoning her coat beside the rusty stove which the deserted building contained. He had a roaring fire going. "I had to rip the manger out of the shed for firewood. I had started for Flatland, expecting to make it before dark. Got this far when the storm struck."

Later, Harry went to put in the horse and presently Tory heard the animal's soft snort of comfort as he unharnessed it. Her mind began to function normally again. Had the blizzard struck the farm yet, and would Lane worry? Would he attempt to search for her in the blinding storm? She

snatched the door open and stood staring into the swirling blizzard, straining her eyes in the direction of the trail.

Harry came from the shed, fighting his way the few steps it took. Tory moved back. Snow skittered across the room like sand and the wind darted in to tear at her skirts.

"Whew! That—wind—would—cut an iron rail in two." Harry shut the door and leaned against it, breathless. "There isn't much around the place to burn. We'll have to keep out all the cold we can. The storm may last three days."

"Th-three days?" Tory caught her breath. "Did you see Lane as you passed the farm?" It seemed ages since she had seen Lane. And each passing minute, now, her need for him grew.

"N-no, I didn't. I was late in getting away from the store, and in a hurry to reach Flatland. I've been doing fairly well on the wheat exchange this year. I wanted to buy more options this week." Harry paused and looked at her sharply. "I say, Victoria, are you completely comfortable? Take off your coat. Later, you may need it more, if the fuel gives out. Sorry I haven't tea to offer you. We'll feel the need of tea, likely, before we get away from here."

Tory removed her coat reluctantly. She could not dispel the feeling the stop was only temporary, that very soon she would be on her way again. A blast of mighty wind shook the building, and a loose board somewhere made a vibrating racket.

"There's food, and tea, in the buggy," she said faintly as Harry's words reached her foggy brain. "We could melt snow, make something hot to drink."

Harry took a rusted pan from a nail behind the stove, and opened the door. Tory crowded behind him, desperately anxious to peer into the storm, yet knowing she could see nothing but that impenetrable whiteness. She had an impulse to shout, but of course the wind would thin the sound to silence almost the instant it left her throat.

As she stared she thought for one crazy instant that something moved out there in the night. The swift hope flared that it might be Lane coming to look for her. But the hope died at once. Of course there had been nothing there. It was her wish and her imagination playing her tricks.

"Worst—blizzard I've seen, in five years on the prairie!" Harry gasped, returning with the snow and closing the door again. Snow was driven into the thick beaver collar of his coat until it was white.

In the shed the horse nickered suddenly. Was another horse near? Tory strained her ears.

"Do you hear anything?" she demanded. "Must be someone coming." She jerked the door open again. There was something moving down the trail.

Then her breath went out of her. Of course it was only a thin spot in the storm, and she was thankful that that was so. No living thing could face that wind for five miles. She hoped, suddenly, that Lane had not tried.

"I say," Harry protested, "let's keep the blooming door shut. We'll freeze in that wind." He took the door out of her hand and closed it with finality.

"I—I thought I heard something," she said inadequately.

"Perhaps someone else on the trail. Did you pass anyone?"

"Wagons, miles back." Tory had forgotten them. But she was shaking now. "Let's hurry that tea," she said through chattering teeth.

"Blizzards like this make me look forward to retiring to England," Harry said wryly. "Do you think of going back?"

"Oh, yes. I often dream of going."

"When I go, I'll have plenty of pounds and pence, so I shall be able to live in comfort the rest of my days," he stated with satisfaction, adding, "You're wasted on the prairie, Victoria."

Tory was too weary to reply. She desperately wanted tea. She watched the snow in the pan melt, begin to steam. Would

it never boil? The fragrant tea was just ready to drink when a shout startled them. Harry flung open the door. A man bundled to the eyebrows stepped in, and quickly threw back a snow-encrusted collar.

It was Herman Schultz. He replied to Harry's greeting and Tory's cool "How do you do," with a grunt and a sly smile from one to the other of them. Tory shivered with a sudden inner cold. The way Schultz kept nodding to himself, the way his small eyes watched her and then Harry, made her skin crawl. It was sheer malice. On the winter prairie conventions were forgotten when people sought shelter in a storm.

Before dawn the wind died. The air grew intensely cold. The fire in the rusty stove went out because there was nothing else to burn. Dawn seeped into the icy shack, and the three there made ready to proceed in Herman's wagon. It had been a grim night. Something in the German's manner robbed it of what comfort the three might have found in the shared shelter.

Harry tucked a robe around Tory's feet. The car would have to remain in the shed, probably until spring. Tory's buggy with the broken wheel would have to be left, too.

"Tuck this closer." Harry leaned over her.

"No," Tory gulped, hating the way Herman looked down at them, hating his unpleasant grin. Just like him to tell whatever he wanted to tell, with no thought of truth, she thought resentfully.

She could have wept with joy and relief when they reached the ridge, and she saw her home beyond. A plume of smoke was rising skyward from the chimney. She trembled in anticipation of seeing Lane again.

Schultz stopped his wagon before the door. Lane came out and advanced across the new drifts unsmilingly. Tory could scarcely restrain a shout of happiness at the sight of his

lean figure. She thrust the robe away, stood up and leaned over the edge of the wagon box toward him.

Lane helped her to the ground, avoiding her eyes. Dropping her mittened hand quickly, he turned to untie the horse from the endgate of the wagon.

"The buggy wheel broke, just when I got as far as that old shack up—"

Interrupting her, he spoke curtly to Herman.

"Thanks for giving my wife a lift home." There was dismissal in his tone.

"You'll come in to breakfast, Harry?" Tory urged. "We can drive you to the store, later." She looked at Lane, waiting for him to echo the invitation heartily, to second the offer of a ride to town.

Lane did not speak, and under the ugly grin which was spreading on Herman's face, Tory felt hot color rush into her face.

"No, no thanks," Harry said hastily, "I—I think I'd better ride on. I can walk from the bridge, where Herman turns off."

The wagon moved on. The wheels made a shrieking, mocking whine on the frosty snow. Lane turned abruptly toward the house, still not looking at her.

Angered by his silence, she ran at his heels.

"Your manners are insufferable," she cried hotly. "You could have been civil. If it hadn't been for Harry, last night, I might have frozen to death."

He swung round. "Harry seems to have had the whole thing well planned. Maybe you knew he was going to meet you at that shack. I seem to remember you were hell-bent to go on this trip."

"That's not true!" she protested, quivering as if he had suddenly struck her. "The storm caught me! You know how that is. I didn't know Harry was there, and Herman got there not long after I did."

"I didn't see him. And his wagon could hardly have been hidden." Lane's dark eyes burned in his white face.

"You—didn't—see—? You—came?" She remembered the nicker of her horse, shortly before Herman's arrival.

"I rode Pitch almost to the door. I had been crazy with worry, picturing you lost, frozen, maybe. But there you were—snug with—with *him*." He made a sudden gesture of despair. "I'm a fool for not seeing it all long ago."

"You believe—that?" She was shaking with the injustice of his accusation.

Lane shrugged and turned away. His shoulders sagged. The movement told her that he did, indeed, believe it all. Incoherent denials tumbled to her lips. Almost, she shouted them out.

But swift and fierce pride stopped her tongue. Let him believe the worst. She would never tell him now how impatiently she had been rushing home to him, determined to end their differences with explanations which should have been made long since. Let him burn with doubt, and go down into agonizing despair, as she had done in the past!

"I'll never deny it!" she cried after him with quick and hard passion. "Think what you please. But never ask questions of me again!"

And yet—deep in her was a joy for his unjust jealousy. At least, Lane Jarvis was not living in the past—not now!

A dozen times in those days Tory looked at Lane, her eyes hungrily tracing the line of his cheek and jaw. If he would soften, meet her half way, they might yet find the road to happiness. She hugged little Pat to her heart and rocked away the evenings, while tears rose ever to her eyes.

She learned the cause of her body weariness at breakfast some days later. She had taken the first spoonful of her porridge when painful turmoil in her stomach forced her to leave the table hastily. The violence of her retching brought tears to her eyes. Pushing the hair back from her brow wearily, she

returned to her chair. There was only one meaning to that nausea. She was pregnant again.

Feeling Lane's gaze, she was compelled to meet his eyes. The unmistakable suspicion in his tense face stung her to fury. All the hurt and misery of the days boiled up in swift, unconsidered words.

"So you think it isn't yours? All right. That is your privilege. As for me I want to go home. You promised once that if ever I wanted to go, you'd provide the money somehow. I want to go now. All you care about really, is the land and your beautiful horses."

Lane swore and rose, the movement upsetting his chair. He stood towering over Tory and at her side Patricia whimpered in fright. Tory tried to comfort the child with a reassuring arm while she faced Lane.

"All right. Just get the money for me and Patricia to go."

"But you cannot take Pony," he flared heatedly, "and I cannot raise the money right now. Five hundred dollars doesn't grow in the buckbrush."

On the stove cooking mash bubbled too loudly, and a great ball of steam left it with a mocking sound. Lane strode across the room and pushed the pan back. Tory sank into her chair. Mash—mash—horses—horses—and the twitch of Lane's shoulders. She saw them twitching now and the movement infuriated her.

"You could sell some horses," she suggested maliciously.

"Nobody has enough money to buy them, this year." He stirred the mash jerkily.

"Don't talk that to me!" she jeered. "I know your horses get more consideration from you than your wife or child. You wouldn't sell one for us."

"All right, I won't talk to you!" he shouted back. "Words don't get us anywhere. We'll see how we get along without them!"

Later that day Tory heard hammering in the shed. Lane

was making there a neat cubbyhole of a room, with a bunk built into one corner.

Week after week Tory cooked Lane's meals and washed his clothes. Daily she made up the bed in that cold shed and devised new ways to hurt his pride. The one sure way was in the calls of Harry Watts. He came often.

And so the days of December passed, with Tory ignoring for as long as she possibly could, the child which would come in early August. She lived ages in the winter and spring, with silence between Lane and herself as a widening grave.



Chapter 23. The new town, which had held thirty people in January, held three hundred by the following June. There were cross streets behind the main street on either side, and on the main thoroughfare false-fronted stores faced each other contentiously over long hitching racks. At noon the street stood lined with wagons from the west and from the south country.

There was a raw newness to the place. The bright obelisk of the grain elevator, being completed in readiness for the coming of the rails, had a tinny glare that was startling against the dun-colored land. The only painted building was the hip-roofed livery barn. With the promise of new towns further along the survey, the livery business was the best in town.

The school, which had been built the year before for a scant dozen youngsters, held forty pupils now. The teacher boarded with Mrs. Schiller, the liveryman's wife. The girl who worked in Harry's store, the new doctor, and the man in the bank, all boarded at the new restaurant. And there were often drummers snatching meals there between livery trips from Flatland.

Social life on the prairie that summer centered in the town, of course. Trading butter and eggs at the stores on Saturday. Church at the schoolhouse each Sunday, even if the building was nearly a mile out of town. The school was part of the town's life. Most of the children lived in town.

Tory was president of the new Ladies' Aid, and after the loneliness of her first years the honor held a certain satis-

faction. The Aid was a symbol of things only dreamed of, then.

But the most important social event that year was a celebration in the town on June twenty-second. People came from Willow Bunch, from the Dirt Hills and even from Flatland, dressed in stiff Sunday best to honor the day. For on that day, in London, half a world away, George V was crowned.

Tory came to understand yet a little more, that day, the meaning of the land itself. She began to feel the depth and the power and the life the land was; to know, too, that to Lane and to all the other men, who had come from how many far places, the land was the beginning of all. It was the foundation under their feet and it was the fount of life.

Yet back home again, shut within her own silence and Lane's wordless taciturnity, the very knowledge of how much the land meant to him annoyed her. If in those busy days they could have discussed together the house they had once planned—or even if she could have found, in the troubled depths of his eyes, some reassurance—then perhaps the prairie winds would have sung promise to her again, as they apparently did to everyone else.

That year Lane's entire acreage of wheat was the new Marquis strain. The grain waved thickly on the summer-fallowed field which he had worked so faithfully the previous summer, and it was his habit to pause each evening, just to gaze at its lush promise. The rank growth was proof of his dogged faith in the land, and Tory knew the wheat filled him with contentment.

Through that summer, Tory's weeks all pointed forward to Sunday. Brushing Patsy's curls, dressing herself in her best for church, Tory felt some of the homesickness and the unhappiness in her heart ease. She dressed her child proudly, and when they set out in the buggy for the schoolhouse, with Lane in his best beside her, the short journey held a certain compensation to her pride. For this brief interval out of each

unhappy week Tory was humbly grateful, as neighbors, never suspecting that the two had not actually spoken to each other since November, lifted hats or hands in friendly greeting to Mr. and Mrs. Lane Jarvis.

Week after week, in spite of her anger and resentment, in spite of the smarting injustice of Lane's attitude, Tory hoped passionately that he would bridge the silence. She could not, she just was not able to close the silence herself.

In the first years, Tory had not so much minded the pinching and the constant lack of money. They had lacked many things, but she had regarded the lack as a temporary inconvenience. But now so many things waited upon a good crop. New implements, more barn room. An addition to the house and things for the house. The most desperate need of all was fencing for the long slope down to enclose the waterhole. Lane could have purchased fencing materials on credit, but he had a stubborn resistance to debt.

One Sunday morning Tory polished Patsy's worn shoes in readiness for church. The child ran barefoot through the week, a fact which irked Tory. New shoes could be bought at Harry's store, but Lane's notion was that they make the old ones do until after harvest.

He drove the team of spirited three-year-olds that day. He had been breaking them carefully, and they trotted down the slope with heads lifted on arched necks, long manes streaming in the wind. The wheels rumbled loudly on the bridge as they crossed the dry creek bed.

The Nystroms were tying to a hitching post before the school barn as Lane drew his team to a halt. Ole lifted a hand in greeting.

"Heat bane scorch, this veek." He shook his head mournfully.

"Heat makes the wheat grow fast," Lane replied.

"Heat bring hail sometime, too." Ole was gloomy.

Mr. and Mrs. Schiller walked into the yard with their small daughter. Tory greeted them, and Lane nodded.

"Strange to see the liveryman walking, Jim," he said easily. Jim Schiller shrugged in bluff good nature. "I'll be glad when the steel is finally laid into town. Seven drummers got into town last night, and four land locators. All wanting teams at once. I haven't a horse left in the barn. Say—" he eyed the three-year-olds appraisingly—"I'll give you four hundred, cash, for that team."

Four hundred dollars! Tory held her breath. She saw an immediate addition to the house, a fence down to the water hole, a new binder for harvest, shoes for Patsy.

"No. No, I wouldn't sell," Lane replied quickly, while the spirited young horses sawed back and forth impatiently. "Not yet," he added, as though to himself.

Tory could not believe her ears. He could not have said no! Her breath went out of her painfully.

"Five hundred, then. I need a fast team badly," Schiller insisted. Lane shook his head. He offered an explanation:

"I wouldn't sell horses I'd raised into the livery business for a thousand dollars, Jim, unless I had a dire need for the money. Too hard a life, with every Tom, Dick and Harry driving them."

Tory stared at her husband, and somehow the anger that had been in her went. It was the first time in months that she had looked at him closely. The deeply graven lines of his face shocked her. If resentment against his refusal of Schiller's offer had not been seething in her breast, she could have felt sympathy for the worry apparent in his face.

But they needed money so desperately. And the pasture was alive with horses and colts. There had been six colts this year. That crop was one which never failed, it seemed. Five hundred dollars—and Lane had turned it down! Why?

Five hundred dollars. The poison of money crept into her heart while the service went on. She could not lift her voice in

song today. Five hundred—she could go home on five hundred dollars! And that, she suddenly realized, was Lane's real reason. That was "why."

After church was over, people stood about the yard and on the schoolhouse steps in small groups, discussing the heat and the state of the crops. There was talk, too, of the rails which would be reaching Jarvis before long. Everyone spoke of the rails as STEEL—important, capitalized.

Tory climbed into the buggy. Ole, standing close by, talking to Lane, wiped his brow with the sleeve of his Sunday shirt.

"Hot. Crik bane all dry, if heat keep opp. You t'ink that waterhole last, all town haul from there?"

"Well, I guess it will," Lane replied. "Is it getting so low?" The well near the house was still providing water for his stock.

"Yust about mud." Ole shook his head gloomily.

"I'll drive past it on the way home," Lane decided, taking up the reins. "But we'll get a soaker before long, I'm sure. A good thunder shower would fill the creek."

Young Lars came running up, hearing Lane's words.

"Can I ride to the creek in the back of the buggy, Mr. Jarvis?"

"Sure, Lars. Climb on. Hang onto the back of the seat. This team jumps sometimes."

Awkward in his Sunday best, Lars pulled himself up behind the seat. Lane guided the skittish team away from the main trail and along the base of the bluff toward the big waterhole. The grass had lost its earlier green, but cow peas spread splotches of bright yellow on the knolls. Wild roses bloomed along the creek bank, and their fragrance was heavy in the drowsy heat.

"Good growing weather, ain't it, Mr. Jarvis?" Lars asked importantly.

"Very good," Lane agreed, concealing a smile.

Beyond the water hole as they approached, on a narrow

flat above the creek, Schultz's buildings looked drab and insignificant in the strong sunlight.

A bend of the creek bed made the waterhole where spring freshets had deeply undermined the bank. On the west side of the hole there was a sheer six-foot cutbank above the water. But on the east, a thicket of brush sloped down not too steeply. From either end, the pool was open to level approach, and the tracks of cattle showed there now.

"Do you think it'll dry right up?" Lars demanded with boyish insistence as Lane halted the team to scan the pool.

Lane shrugged half wearily. "We'll have to hope hard for rain."

Just then several horses loped away from the Schultz barn and came toward the pool. Schultz rode behind them, snapping a blacksnake whip and cursing loudly. In a moment the animals were shouldering each other at the edge of the water, seeking firm footing in the mud while they drank.

His inspection of the pool finished, Lane started his team. Lars leaped from the back of the rig and ran to join his family who were following some distance behind Lane. As the boy jumped, one of the horses at the pool threw up a dripping muzzle and with a snort backed hastily out of the mud. It circled awkwardly in front of Lane's team, suddenly crowding them back.

The nervous young horses shied back quickly, sharply cramping the buggy wheels. Lane lifted the whip from its socket and flicked it gently in the direction of the crowding horse.

Although the whip did not touch the animal, Schultz went red with anger.

"Keep your goddam whip ov my horse!" he shouted.

"I didn't touch your horse." Lane pulled the reins and skillfully relieved the tilted position of the cramped buggy. The pair of colts reared a little, excited by the German's loud voice.

Schultz shouted again, "You keep your goddam horses and colts ov my plowing!" The spirit of Lane's team seemed to enrage him. "High bred steppers! Bah! Thoroughbred—ha, ha!" The man laughed in loud derision, and Tory felt his piggish eyes upon her bulky body. "I guess sometimes you don't mind if breed be mix a little. Ha, ha, ha!" He crack-ed his long whip maliciously over the heads of the nervous young team.

The skittish pair bolted promptly, streaking madly across the creek bed, wildly on up the slope toward the farmyard. And as Tory clung to the buggy with one hand, and held little Patsy clutched tight to her breast with the other, she heard Schultz's mocking laughter by the waterhole.

Trying desperately to stop the runaways, Lane looked back. There was fury in his face. But Schultz had known those high-lifed colts could not easily be halted, that he was for the moment safe from Lane's rage.

As the buggy jounced and bounced up the rough slope, Tory burned with humiliation. She held whimpering Patsy closer still. Lane spoke to the colts with steadying insistence. By the time the vehicle had leaped across the fireguard, he had them under control again. He brought them to a stop before the door.

Stepping out, he turned and took the child from Tory's arms. He held Patsy close a moment, as if grateful no harm had come to her. He put her down gently, then extended his hand to Tory. She felt a tremble in his fingers. Somehow the quivering of those strong brown hands touched her heart.

That evening Lane broke the silence which had so long hung between them.

"We've got to fence that north slope *now*. I'll go into debt for posts and wire. Harvest will be over in a few weeks and I can pay for them. And you can begin looking at those house plans again. We're going to have a bumper crop this year."

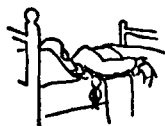
They were casual, commonplace words, easily spoken, but

Tory's heart raced tumultuously. He had spoken to her at last! It was like coming into brilliant quiet sunshine, after months of storm and darkness!

And in that wonderful relief was the realization that one hope had been fortified by the struggle between Lane and herself. There had been no recurrence in him of his old battle with the past in that time. His mind had kept on present problems. It was a hope, a true hope of recovery.

But she only smiled gently, and said:

"Yes, Lane—yes—"



Chapter 24. The day following the waterhole incident, Lane brought home wire and posts for the fence which was now a necessity to divide his own land from that of Schultz. But the building of the fence was added work to Lane's already full days.

The haying could not stop, nor could the routine handling of the yearling colts and the gradual breaking of the two-year-olds. Any task concerning his horses was never neglected by Lane.

So when other men's work was finished for the day, he worked down the rocky slope with pick and shovel, setting posts in an unbroken line ready for the stringing of the wire. Sometimes the sound of his shovel, striking a stone hidden under the sod, was a harsh note in the moonlight. Sometimes, too, he rose at dawn to get in an hour before the regular chores. Then he came in to breakfast drenched to the knees from the dewy grass.

It was slow work but gradually that line of posts lengthened. As the days passed the heat increased, settling down over the prairie in a too-long stretch which gradually stopped the dews, and which at last threatened Lane's fine stand of wheat. He grew silent, taciturn. Crop failure meant more unpaid debts.

But there was one bright spot in the gloomy picture, Tory knew. That was the young sorrel Luck. The three-year-old mare was in foal now and Lane watched her zealously.

And half a hundred times a day he scanned the skies, as

if he could will clouds to roll up the thunder shower which would break the heat and bring back a little green feed to the brown prairie. Rain would add dollars to the crop by swelling yet a little more the milky kernels in the heads.

On his way in to supper on a day which had been the hottest yet, Lane stopped again to stare at the cloudless sky. Jack Hildrick, passing on his way home from Jarvis, drew rein at the gate and shouted a greeting.

"STEEL will reach town next week, they say. And the first freight will bring a carload of farm machinery. You going to buy a new binder this year, Jarvis?"

Tory was slicing bread on the narrow work table before the south window. She saw Lane glance ruefully at his worn and much repaired harvester, saw his half hopeless shrug.

"Sure need a new one, all right, but harvesters cost a hell of a lot of money."

"We'll get a chance to cure that at the election this fall!" Hildrick declared. "Reciprocity would be a damn good thing for Canadian farmers. It would bring the price of implements down where a man could afford them."

Lane's shoulders stiffened perceptibly. "I'm not sold on that reciprocity proposal myself. Have you been reading the papers?"

"Sure I've been reading them. Saw last week where some politician in the United States House of Representatives says the States is preparing to annex Canada. Be a damn good thing for Canada, too!"

"Annex Canada?" Lane exploded. "Canada doesn't want to be annexed! If all this agitation for reciprocity means a step toward that, I'll fight it if I have to ride the roads from now to election eve, explaining to the farmers that they are being sold out!"

Hildrick snorted. "You Conservatives will have to change your way of thinking. Why should the Canadian farmer pay tribute every time he buys a drill or a mower, a plow or a

binder? Even President Taft says Canada is at the parting of the ways." American in his sympathies, Hildrick was hampered by none of the Loyalist ideals which were second nature to Lane.

"Why should a Canadian become an American?" Lane demanded angrily. "Perhaps some of us are willing to pay the price to remain Canadians; and may our spirit never die!"

The bluff and hearty American blinked in surprise at Lane's fervor and hastily changed the subject.

"Only an argument, Jarvis. Think we'll have rain tomorrow?"

Taking the plate of sliced bread to the table Tory pushed the hair back from her hot forehead wearily, hoping that the few clouds in the western sky did mean rain. For days now she had been listless and tired. If it would only rain! But those clouds would probably blow over and leave nothing more helpful than a shadow on the parched land.

The days of late July dragged miserably. Tory felt the heat more keenly with every passing day. Even young Patsy grew fretful and cantankerous. Lane went about with a grim set to his lips, and the stock began to act ornery and mean as the cloudless days continued.

But the grain filled in spite of the drought, and gradually hardened to precious pellets that were worth their weight in gold. It was beyond the reach of harm by drought now, and when Tory heard Lane singing one evening, as he rasped hoofs at the barn, she knew that the anxiety which had harried him through the weeks had lessened a little. The sound of his voice was like a powerful tonic to her, and her own waiting for fruition was a little easier to bear.

Day followed dry day, each with its strong and whistling wind. The only beauty of those days to Tory was the swift play of light and shadow on the wheat which rippled in the field. Sometimes she stood gazing at those shadows for minutes on end, seeing the never-repeated patterns appear and

vanish as the slender stalks bowed and dipped and rose again, curtsying in constant homage to the prairie wind.

Once, the changing form of light and shadow reminded her of the shadows which had fallen across the trail on that night of her first coming to the prairie. Startled to know that she had not actually thought of those pickets on top of Sentinel for weeks, she turned, half expecting to find them gone.

They were there still. But the sight of them stirred no feeling in her. That, at least, she had conquered.

The sudden pound of hoofs surging around the house brought a gasp of fright from her. For an instant she feared her fancy had given actual form to the wind. But the sound was real, and several heavy work horses circled the house clumsily, then trampled destructively into the field of Marquis wheat.

Those spade-footed bays belonged to Schultz. Tory heard the man's guttural shouts and curses as he rode in pursuit; heard, too, Lane's angry voice as he raced across the barnyard in an effort to turn the milling horses away from the grain field.

But Schultz, cursing, and slashing angrily at the gray he rode, circled widely into the standing wheat, turning and doubling back in utter disregard for the grain.

"They'll come out," Lane shouted, "I'll drive them out!" He ran, in an effort to turn the trampling animals back.

"Mind yer own goddam bisnez!" Schultz shouted profanely.

"This wheat *is* my business." Lane slapped impatiently at a horse near him with the flat of his hand. The horse turned abruptly, colliding so violently with the horse that Schultz rode that the man was unseated. He fell into the tall grain in an inglorious heap.

Red-faced with rage, he scrambled to his feet and tried hastily to mount again. But he was a short, thick-set man, and the gray, sensing his anger, kept side-stepping away from him.

"Stand still, you sonofabitchin—" he jerked the animal viciously.

"I'll give you a hand." Lane approached, but Schultz struck out at him in sudden fury.

"When I need help from you, you goddam—"

"Don't be a fool," Lane interrupted impatiently. "Get after those horses before they come trampling into the wheat again."

"Fool?" Schultz leered, "Fool? You're the fool, you goddam thick-headed—thick-headed—" The man's groping German thoughts could not find the English word, so he looked toward Tory, standing in the doorway now, and laughed. The sound was worse than a curse, or a blow.

Quicker than light, Lane's long arm shot out. The German staggered under the blow. After he had struck, Lane's dark head seemed to snap back, and Tory saw him stare at his hand, as if he could not believe that he had delivered the blow. For the moment he looked dazed.

With the sudden strength of panic, Schultz scrambled unaided to the back of his horse. He went thundering down the slope after the drove of horses, now racing playfully homeward. Lane stood motionless where he had been, still staring at his hand.

In the doorway Tory began to move back into the room, but she was assailed by sudden dizziness. She tried to blink it away, but the room reeled around her, and the wind hissing shrilly against the screen seemed to be mocking her, as the German's laughter had mocked.

The blackness did not go back. The wind grew shriller. It was mad, crazy-mad, as Lane had been when he lashed out savagely at Schultz. She had seen Lane in rages, but not the murderous, unthinking rage which had possessed him just now. It frightened her.

She tried to cry out, but the blackness pressed her voice

back into her throat. The dizziness was a sharp pain. Then there was nothing.

The touch of a damp cloth on her brow roused her. Lane was bending over her. His eyes, from which the fury was gone now, were singularly empty.

"Feeling better?"

Remembering his mighty rage of a few moments before, she drew away instinctively.

"Tory—" His low voice pleaded with her. She did not respond.

His hands were upon her, suddenly, clinging to her nerveless fingers desperately.

"Darling, forgive me for all the months I've tortured you so. I was mad with jealousy. I didn't doubt you. If you had only denied, when I accused you—" He shook her, half roughly, seeking to compel her to open her eyes.

But the scornful, derisive laughter of Schultz still echoed in her head. The sound was more dreadful and bitter than all the other dreadful and bitter things in this violent land. With an infinitely weary movement, she withdrew her hands from his.

"Don't shut me out of your heart!" he cried in despair.

She spoke then, in sick desperation.

"I—I don't want this baby. I hate the—the horrible prairie and everything on it."

He captured her fingers again and strove to force response to his clasp.

"Victoria," he whispered brokenly. The cry wrung her heart and for a moment she wanted to respond to his need. But all at once a sharp pain knifed through her, draining feeling out of her. She cried out, frightened. It was weeks too early for that kind of pain.

But the pain came again, sharper.

"Get Emma, quick," she gasped. The wind whistled shrilly against the screen. Tory was not sure if the sound was the

wind, an echo in the close, dark walls, or the cry of some lost and lonely bird. At that moment she needed the comfort of Lane's arms. But she told herself stubbornly, in her half-conscious state, that she was glad—*glad* that she had hurt him.

When she was up again, she was going—going away forever. Lane had allowed his jealousy to run too long, too far, exposing her to the scorn of that swinish brute, Schultz.



Chapter 25. Emma stayed the night. Her comforting presence reassured Tory. But the Swedish woman was outspoken and emphatic before she left next morning.

"You stay in bed, whole week. Not stand on foot one time. Not yust yourself to t'ink of. You hear?" she warned.

"But I feel all right this morning," Tory protested. "I'll feel quite strong as soon as I eat a little. I'll just sit on the edge of the bed—" She made as if to rise. "There's a month yet until—"

Emma held her down with a large, square hand.

"Ack gud! You sit opp you vilt, yust like string! I see vimen faint in heat."

Tory closed her eyes in weary resignation. She did feel weak from the unremitting heat of the night.

Emma was pleased.

"Now you act like sense. I yust go home, see how my Lena do. I'll take Pony. She stay my house few days. See, I move the bed a little, so you see through the door."

From her pillow Tory could see down across the wheat field where the grain stood so thick and full of promise and where, in a week or two, the binder would be turning it into golden sheaves. Just now a hush lay over the farm and over all of Jarvis Prairie. It was a rare, almost windless day. Tory half dozed. The sounds she heard . . . Rover's bark down near the creek . . . the low rasping of a thirsty hen . . . the fly-maddened stomp of a horse . . . noises which had a thin unreality . . . nothing was real . . .

It was about the middle of the afternoon when she first noticed the clouds in the southwest. The air was breathless, and the sun was a glare against the panes. In the heat the walls shrank with faint, protesting sounds that were like gasps of pain. Tory watched the clouds idly. Her hair clung to her forehead damply and her throat was parched. She looked with longing toward the water pail near the door.

Sitting up, slowly, she slipped her feet experimentally out of bed. But when she tried to stand she felt like an empty sack. Her backbone seemed completely limp. "You wilt," Emma had said. Wilt was exactly the right word. She sank quickly back into bed, and tried again to doze. The afternoon wore toward evening.

The quick flutter of the curtains with their gay embroidery aroused her. The clouds were rolling up from the southwest now, and there was a faint breeze stirring. She breathed deep of the cooler air. It was stimulating and made her feel stronger at once. She watched the clouds again in fascination. They were galloping like a drove of fighting gray stallions, slashing in a stampede across the sky.

Lane came in and gave her a drink of water. He shook her pillow and smoothed the spread silently. When he had finished he stood in the doorway scanning the clouds anxiously.

One silver-white cloud separated from the mass. It had the round and fruitful beauty of a milk-white mare with a streaming mane. Luminous, it glowed with a sort of reflected light as it moved swiftly apart from the other clouds.

"There's hail in that cloud," Lane worried, and went out to start the evening chores. The slight breeze had died. There was a stillness over everything, a gradual darkening of the landscape as the clouds blotted out the sun. On the land no blade of grass stirred, and over all was an air of interminable, expectant waiting.

Suddenly the wind came, a chilly gust that whipped across the yard, sweeping dust and straw litter into spiraling whirls

which lifted quickly out of the line of Tory's vision. Above, the clouds seemed to have halted their swift advance. Now they milled, like a suddenly halted herd desperately seeking escape.

Lane appeared at the door again and scrutinized the heavily freighted white cloud anxiously. Tory saw his arms jerk, half lift—as if he would reach skyward and bodily thrust that one cloud back.

Then lightning flashed with a blinding glare, and thunder rolled overhead with a deafening roar. The windows rattled, and in the shed milk cans jangled with a tinny sound. Rover whined, and wheeled close to Lane's heels, a pace or two from the door.

Wind tore at the eaves as the fury of the storm broke abruptly over the house. Rain was a torrent upon the roof. Lightning played from corner to corner of the room. Tory cowered in bed. She had never seen such violence in a thunder storm before.

"Lane!" she cried in terror, but the mighty wind drowned her voice. The storm had come up the slope like a wall of noise and wind and rain. It was the whistle and scream of hundreds of fighting stallions, the violence of thousands of angered, slashing hoofs.

Lane braced himself against the storm and stood with face lifted, anxiously watching the white cloud. Rover dashed for shelter, but when Lane did not follow, the dog went back, whining, and took his stand beside his master, holding his shaggy body braced to take the drenching fury of the rain.

Nut-sized hailstones began a jarring thump, thump on the roof. Under the pelting, icy stones, Lane was forced to take shelter. He retreated to a position just inside the shed door at the moment that luminous cloud opened and poured out its destructive, frozen freight. Hail swept up the slope, across the yard, and on to cascade relentlessly upon the precious, standing wheat.

Lane watched the utter destruction like a sleepwalker. On the roof the falling stones made a dreadful roar, until the cloud swept beyond range of the farm. It was over in such a short time. Ten minutes after the first flash of lightning, the golden field lay in muddy ruins. In those broken, pulpy stalks a year's dreams were dead.

Suddenly Lane moved with a mighty lunge away from the door and out across the yard, where hailstones large as walnuts rolled under his stumbling feet, where rain still fell in a drenching downpour. But he was oblivious to the rain and the wind which drove it. As he ran, the savage defiance of his uplifted arms, the wild swaying of his shoulders, betrayed in him a mood wilder than any Tory had ever seen in him.

And out at the edge of the field—where the space of minutes before his golden grain had waved—Lane stopped and shook his fists in impotent rage and fury at the cloud-filled sky.

Then Tory heard his words, loud curses against the storm and the land and God. Beside himself with despair, he hurled defiant words as violent as the storm itself to the very heavens. A shocked cry broke from Tory.

Weakly she struggled out of bed, stumbled toward the door. Once she fell, and pulled herself up by the edge of the table. She fought her way to the door, all the time watching in horrible fascination Lane's drunken swaying, hearing him shout into the wind his terrible defiance.

At the door she cried out again in protest. She had to cover her ears against his blasphemous voice. When she took her hands from the wall she felt herself slipping—down—down—

Her cry reached Lane. Dimly she was aware of his running footsteps, of his rain-drenched arms as he carried her back to bed.

The long hours of the night following the hailstorm were a nightmare of pain to Tory, and the only thing which made it bearable was the comfort of Emma's rough but infinitely

kind hands. They gave Tory more assurance than the antiseptic competence of the young doctor hastily summoned from the town.

The doctor's face floated in and out of her consciousness. Sometimes she thought it was Harry. Sometimes she took it for Lane. Sometimes she whispered one name or the other, unconsciously. The only memorable reality of the night was the pain.

Dawn was a smothering gray blanket against the windows when everything was over. Emma was tearfully sympathetic.

"Such a fine, black-haired boy, too. He looked yust like his Poppa."

So the child Tory had thought she did not want was dead. Terrible emptiness overwhelmed her. Her tears flowed unchecked.

"Lane?" Suddenly a hazy memory of his haggard face in the night came to her. She needed him now.

"W-where is Lane?" she asked weakly.

"He yust drive colts to crik. He come quick," Emma soothed.

Tory heard the pound of racing hoofs on the slope and Rover's frenzied bark. It seemed an eternity to her before Lane came in.

Before the misery which was in his gaunt and unshaven face she had to close her eyes a moment. He came to her. She felt the restraint that was on him. She longed to put her hand into his, longed for the satisfying comfort of his arms. She hoped also for some sign that he, too, felt the loss of the child she had said she did not want, but now knew she had wanted desperately.

If she had cried out to him in appeal and need then, everything between them might have been changed. But what was there to say? She hated the prairies more than ever now.

She had nothing to say, if Lane said nothing to her.

In a moment he turned from the bedside. Tory saw his

shoulders snap with that odd, jerking movement she knew so well. And, longing desperately in her heart to cry out to him, she let him go.



Chapter 26. Tory lay helpless in bed as the child which had not drawn breath was laid to rest in the town's newly plotted cemetery. Grief-stricken, she determined that this was the end. The moment she was strong enough to walk she would leave Lane. She tried to crush down her grief with more pleasurable memories. She remembered those Sunday afternoons when Harry had visited the farm.

He had told her how he felt.

"I could do so much for you, Victoria," he had said softly. She had always liked the way he pronounced her name, slowly, fully rounded, his voice saying things words did not say. When Lane was not there Harry's eyes said things to her, too.

"If you should ever make up your mind to leave—all this—" Harry had put a certain contempt into the gesture which included the cramped house and the farm.

At the time Tory had laughed off his words. Although Lane had not spoken to her for weeks then, she had still loved him. Now she wondered exactly what love was. If there was no oneness of mind and heart and soul in marriage, what was left?

All these things were in her mind as Emma sat with her, while Lane and the others attended the little funeral. No tears wet her cheeks until she heard them returning again. There was something so terribly final in the mournful creak of wheels in the yard. All at once the silence of the house was frightening.

She was sobbing wildly when Lane came in.

"Don't, Tory," he said dully, trying to draw her close.

She fought him off hysterically. "You don't care. You don't care about anything but your—your horses!"

He drew back, turning away stonily. He didn't care, she told herself insistently, while tears slid slowly down her cheeks.

"Is there anything I can do for you before I go out?" he asked.

"Just leave me alone. You're glad the baby didn't live. You're glad, aren't you?" She was half hysterical again.

"You don't know what you're saying," he replied, but he did not look back as he left the room.

Emma, who had gone out to meet the rig when it drove into the yard, came in now with Melsie. Emma came to stroke her hair gently for a moment.

"Now, now, yust rest a little, while I feed little Pony."

Melsie placed a hand on hers briefly, too, in sympathy. Tory closed her eyes, exhausted. Presently both of them left, leaving Patricia playing on the floor.

When the door opened again Tory did not open her eyes, until a firm hand was placed on her shoulder.

"I've come," Fern said, "to make you a cup of tea. I understand the emptiness in your heart."

"You don't," Tory stormed rebelliously. "You cannot know how I feel." It was the first time in more than two years that Fern had been inside her house. Tory resented her now and yet she had a curious desire to relax and weep on Fern's shoulder. She jerked away.

"But I do know," Fern insisted.

Tory wanted to prove that Fern was wrong.

"You don't know, because—because I didn't want the baby. I told Lane I didn't. I meant it, too. I—" Her voice was rising without restraint.

"Hush. It never helps to blame oneself. I know that, too."

Tory began to weep steadily again. Fern bent toward her.

"Don't blame yourself, my dear, and don't feel so alone," Fern said gently. "If you had seen Lane's face just now, when he asked me to come—"

"He asked you to come? You're in love with Lane," Tory accused tearfully, feverishly.

Fern ignored that. "Where are your nice cups?" she asked as she pushed the kettle forward.

"Why did you come back here after your husband died?" Tory demanded. "You once hoped to marry Lane, didn't you?"

"You're working yourself into a state," Fern returned with a touch of tartness. Again she asked, "Where are the cups?"

Tory sighed wearily and indicated the shelved box. She watched Fern move across the room, noting the straight shoulders and the fine set of the dark head. Life might have been easier for herself if she had made an effort to be friendly with Fern.

Before lifting the gingham curtain which fell across the front of the box Tory used as a cupboard for her nicer dishes, Fern paused and took up the broken teapot. Tory still kept it in the place of honor on top of the box.

"It is a beautiful thing," Fern said gently. "What a pity it got broken."

Patsy, trailing Fern, reached childish, eager hands upward.

"Not for Pony to play with," Fern reproved gently, replacing the teapot and bringing to the table the fragile Belleek cups.

As Fern buttered the loaf and piled the slices on one of the Belleek plates, Tory watched her, reluctantly admiring the quiet strength of the calm face. Fern, like Lane, belonged to the prairie. The strength of the land was in Fern and all the other women like her who believed in the prairie and its men.

"Fern, tell me—" Tory could not crush the impulse to ask point blank, now, the answer to the things which had puzzled her for so long.

But at that moment Fern turned quickly to waylay Patsy on her way out.

"Now, young lady, you can't play with Mama's teapot." She rescued the Belleek pot which the child had managed to get down from the top of the box.

Fern crossed to the stove where the kettle boiled now, and quickly made the tea. The interruption choked back Tory's desire to talk, and Fern kept up a light and kind chatter intended to lull Tory into forgetfulness of her woes.

After Fern had gone Lane came in. His glance swept the table where some of the buttered bread remained on a plate beside the cups they had used. Fern had washed them before going, standing at the stove smiling down at Tory in the low rocker. Tory missed that smile terribly after Fern went out.

Now Lane weighed the teapot hopefully, took a heavy cup from the everyday dishes and brought his tea to the table. It was when he reached for the fragile Belleek cream pitcher still on the table that his coat sleeve caught one of the china cups and sent it crashing to the floor.

Tory averted her eyes from the quick and contrite glance he gave her. There was an instant of uncertainty. He stooped to pick up the pieces, and sighed with utter futility.

"I—I guess I'm just a clumsy ox," he said miserably. "I didn't mean to break the cup. I'm sorry."

The pathetic abjectness of his voice twisted Tory's heart. She knew that it was degrading to a man to be kept on the defensive constantly. But she was too sorry for herself today to care how much he suffered.



Chapter 27. Lane's binder sat idle in his yard that autumn, while everyone else on Jarvis Prairie harvested their wheat. The flax was not yet ready to cut and he had no wheat. He set the last of the fence posts, and began work on the creek dam he had long planned to build. Later, Swif would help him. Now he broke the ground and hauled rock for the fill.

Crops were good throughout Canada in 1911 and every farmer rushed his harvest, anxious to be first to thresh and among the first to market his grain. Good crops meant price slumps, and the earlier grain commanded a price edge of several cents a bushel.

Even a few cents made a vital difference to the homesteader out where the country was new. Most of them needed cash so desperately, and had such pitifully small acreage. Of course, as grain poured into every elevator, wagons lining up to deliver their loads, prices went down.

Those who could afford to hold their grain past this period of enforced selling profited. Prices would rise again, and those who could, waited. But few could afford to wait.

It was Hildrick whom Tory heard put the case in words, stopping on his way home from Jarvis one afternoon a few weeks before threshing.

"If a man only had a little spare cash, to dabble in wheat futures," he sighed gloomily. "The man who can hold his grain until January or March, or May, is the man who makes money on wheat."

"Well, seeding and harvest may mark a farmer's calendar,

but it's the selling of the crop that gives the whole thing point." Lane looked down across the rubble that had been his wheat. "Can't you hold any of your grain for a better price?"

Hildrick had come to the prairie much better off than most. He had brought from the States his farm machinery and all his stock. Others, like Jon and Ole Nystrom and Chastek, had brought nothing save their bare hands, and a willingness to work. Lane had spent the last of his inheritance—the inheritance which had made the purchase of his land possible—on that trip to England. It was hard going on prairie land, even with some advantages.

Hildrick shook his head grimly.

"If your children are barefoot and winter is coming fast, you can't wait. You have to take around fifty-eight cents a bushel and like it."

Hearing this, Tory sighed. Hildrick was right. The farm year was a vicious circle—spring hope, summer promise, and, too often, autumn despair. It strengthened a little more within her the growing certainty she wanted to leave the prairie forever.

Her strength came back slowly, through the bright autumn weeks. The days seemed endless with their wearying round of housework, late garden harvest, butter making, and keeping track of Patsy, an active runabout now.

Canada throbbed that season with the excitement of an election year. It was no ordinary election, having simply the supremacy of the Conservatives or the Liberals at stake. It was a bitter fight for reciprocity, and it was fought with the clever tool of an attack on national loyalty.

Liberals argued that free lists of agricultural products were a fair return for reduced duty on farm machinery and other American goods which Canadian farmers had to buy. Conservatives harped upon the fact that President Taft had hinted Canada was at the point of secession by remarking it was "at the parting of the ways."

Lane, who until now had been an ardent Liberal, left his work and went campaigning for the Conservatives. His Loyalist faith resented things said by American officials. Canada was Empire. It would forever be Empire. The bond which held it to the Crown was not the "light and imperceptible bond" President Taft suggested.

Across the broad side of his barn Lane tacked the huge election slogan: "A vote for Borden is a vote for King and Flag and Country."

Sandy watched the task of putting the great muslin poster into place. He did not offer assistance, except once when Lane, up on a ladder, dropped his hammer. Sandy's white head bent as he picked up the hammer and handed it back to Lane.

"I'm surprised at ye, lad, goin' back on our grrand old Laurier. When history is written, they'll call Sir Wilfrid the Father of Modern Canada."

"Sir Wilfrid has done nobly by the Dominion," Lane admitted readily. "I'd be the last to deny him credit for the marvelous growth of Canada, the last fifteen years. He's done a grand job of building us into the most powerful unit of the Empire. But there's grave danger in this free trade for us. Didn't you read Kipling's letter in the Montreal Star, warning us we're only nine million against America's ninety million?" Lane's jaw was set grimly as he delivered this argument to Sandy.

The placid Scot used his pipe stem to emphasize his reply.

"Aye, I read that. But I read the other side of the argument, too. Laurier says the farmer who sells wheat and potatoes tae the United States nae muir sells his loyalty than do Kipling, when he sells his varse to the American press. What sort o' reasoning is it, my lad, that honors one deal and shouts doon the other?"

"Canada for Canadians!" Lane cried with stubborn passion. "You'll see when the election's over how many loyal Cana-

dians there are. Borden will win and reciprocity will be defeated. We've a new King, and it's time for a new order."

"Weel, Canada will still be Canada, nae doubt, whatever the upshot. We'll still hae spring and harvest, and snow come winter, and wind all year roun'." Sandy lit his pipe and puffed gently.

"And another thing,"—Lane was warmed to his subject now—"it's time we had a flag for the Dominion, too. One of our own, and not a banner with bits from everywhere but Canada stuck here and there. We need one that means Canada."

"Aye, aye, grant ye that, lad," Sandy agreed fervently.

When the last election returns were in, Borden was victorious, as Lane had been sure he would be. The Laurier regime was done. But as the last days of September rolled by, the change made very little difference to the farmer who threshed his precious, golden wheat as soon as he could beg or bribe a threshing machine to move into his fields, racing to haul his grain to early market.

All day long Tory heard the creak of passing wagons, as they moved slowly down the road to the bridge on their way to the elevator at the new town. The rails were laid now. STEEL was in! Engines came puffing across the prairie bringing long strings of freight cars to the sidings, ready to be loaded with wheat to take back to eastern terminals.

Tory knew the drivers of some of those passing wagons, but some came from miles beyond Hildrick's. They drove shaky old wagons, the rickety boxes sometimes lined with sacks and bits of rag, to prevent the precious grain from sifting away. And as often as not the harness worn by the jaded teams which drew these wagons was held together with wire and rope.

She saw Jack Hildrick take in his first wheat, on a gray day when low clouds scowled overhead and a raw wind blew. The two youngest Hildricks, bundled to the ears in scarfs and large

garments, huddled beside their father on the spring seat. But their small feet, resting on the edge of the grain box, were bare and red in the frosty air.

The shoe business at Harry's store would be very good for a few weeks now. Later that afternoon Tory took Patsy to town, riding beside Lane up the hill beyond the bridge and past Jon's farm.

She looked down the coulee where many shacks and strips of breaking marked the reaches. Her first year, she had thought the prairie an unwritten book. Writing was filling the book now but it was not the kind of book Tory liked to read. She brought her gaze back to Jon's stubble, where the crimson runners of bindweed had spread, like the ebbing blood of summer.

In Harry's store later, while Lane went to the hardware store, Tory backed close to the pot-bellied stove, shivering. It was late, and soon the few customers left. Harry came to stand close to Tory.

"You're not looking yourself, Victoria. You need a change."

Tory's slender shoulders shook with chill. "I suppose I could turn my head and look north instead of south for a day? Or look east instead of west?" she said bitterly. "It is prairie, whichever way you look."

"You're more beautiful than you used to be," he said softly. "The prairie may be hard on beauty, but it has done something for you. Your eyes are different."

His words warmed her. It was pleasant to know that worry and unhappiness, that doubt and grief, had not injured her appearance. But something in Harry's voice warned her to change the subject, quickly. She was not ready to listen to Harry—

"Have you heard from Home lately?" she asked quickly, pretending to fuss over Patsy, warming her feet at the stove.

"Not right lately. I'm thinking of selling out my stores,

Victoria, and going Home in retirement. I've made money. Why rot here?"

There was something urgent in his voice, but Tory did not look up. The silence lengthened. He spoke again.

"I'll be able to attend plays, concerts. Go to the seaside in the summer. Remember how nice it is at Blackpool?" There was soft suggestion in his voice. "Home. The good life."

Tory remembered, and the memory swept her with homesickness. No blizzards or other hardships; no skimping and penny-pinching in that kind of existence. She dared not raise her eyes.

Patsy broke the strained silence.

"Mama, Pony shoes. New shoes for Pony." The child tugged insistently at her skirt.

"Baby is Patsy, dear, not Pony," Tory corrected. She had always hated the nickname but it was the only name the child knew, from all but herself. "New shoes for Patricia." She led the child to the back of the store, where the shoe shelves were ranged.

Her pulses pounded. She could go back—if she would say the word. The mere thought made her dizzy.

"I—I've got a long list here, Harry," she began breathlessly. "Tea, yeast, oatmeal—" she rattled on to conceal the excitement in her heart. "I brought eight pounds of butter, and five dozen eggs. I hope they are a good price today."

"Butter is up to forty-five cents. Eggs twenty-five." Harry was fitting the child with shoes. Tory checked her list again. Coal oil—it took more kerosene now that the evenings were longer and they used the lamps.

"I'd like to give the shoes to Patsy, Victoria." Harry totaled up the list later.

"Leave them on the bill," Tory said shortly, knowing she was unreasonable to resent his generosity. He was fond of Patsy.

She hurried out of the store with her purchases when she

heard Lane's voice on the boardwalk in front. He was talking to Schiller.

"Well, think it over, Jim. If you're still interested, come out tomorrow." His face had the tight look of desperation. Tory learned the reason for his despair as the wagon rumbled out of town.

"Flax is down five cents a bushel. Wheat is going down, too. Next month it'll climb, but what good will that do the farmer who is starving for that few cents difference? We have to sell *now*, and some sonofabitch in Winnipeg or Toronto or Montreal, who never lifted a sheaf or rode a plow, will pile up profits in futures! And the farmer, who sweats and works out his heart because he loves the land, can starve, starve, while debts grind him down—GIDDAP!" he shouted, his passionate anger growing inarticulate.

The movement of his hands as he gave the reins a savage and totally unexpected jerk drew Tory's eyes to them. They were hard and cracked from long hours of digging, and a large scab from an old abrasion caked one knuckle. The sight of those hands drew Tory's quick sympathy, and her resentment against those speculators who profited from the farmer's need flared as high as Lane's.



Chapter 28. Due to the abundant rain of early summer, there had been a thick growth of grass on the sod. Now, however, the grass was a thick and dry mat on the open prairie and along all the road allowances. Lane spoke now and then of the necessity for re-plowing the fireguard. He did, in fact, pull the old walking plow around in readiness.

But the dam was still unfinished. Swif helped him on days he was free. And there was wire yet to be strung for the pasture which would enclose the slope and Lane's end of the water-hole. He had worked feverishly at that task since the unpleasantness with Schultz, but working single-handed was slow.

And of course always the horses and colts had to be cared for. Tory was pulling carrots in her garden, one afternoon soon after their trip to town, when Lane, coming up from planting the final post, paused beside the corral where Luck was confined.

She was a sleek, full grown three-year-old now, and in her golden body she carried Lane's hopes for the future of his horses. She stood about fourteen hands high, and although she had the Arabian's short back and high-set tail, she owned the nervous, quick-moving eyes and the wary feet of the bronco.

Lane whistled at the horse, and stepped inside the corral. The young mare circled the enclosure, tail carried high in the manner peculiar to Arabians. There was still, between these two, that inexplicable conflict which Tory had sensed the first

time she had ever seen the filly, and she sensed it now, watching the mare circle away from Lane there in the corral.

The mare edged back, when he stood waiting. Perhaps if he had waited, instead of advancing . . . But he could not look at her silky coat, at her arched neck and deep shoulders, without wanting to rub his hand down her smooth hide and slender legs. So now he stepped up to touch her.

With a spring which cleared fifteen feet, Luck bounded away to circle the far end of the corral. There was nothing vicious in her movements, but rather a playful wariness. Lane turned away and went to open the larger corral, where the other horses and colts hovered near the gate, waiting to be let out for the afternoon gallop down the slope for water.

Being in foal, Luck was denied this run. Lane would not risk her stepping in a gopher hole or otherwise injuring herself. He dropped the wire gate, and the horses boiled through in a cloud of dust. They sidled along the garden fence toward the open slope, pushing and shouldering, nipping and squealing as they went. Lane swung himself to the back of one of the dapple grays as it slipped past him, and went dashing after the drove.

He had scarcely cleared the end of the garden fence and the fireguard when, with a loud whinny, Luck raced around the inside of her corral, then leaped, clearing the wire in one glorious stretch of legs and body. Like the wind she raced down the slope, galloping past the drove to take the lead from the gray-black Smudge.

Some of the colts nipped at her as she passed. A rangy gelding dug to pursuit. This was the kind of thing she loved. She outdistanced them all, wheeling far in the lead, tail high and mane flying, her delicate but strong nostrils flaring with pure joy in the run. She was three lengths ahead of the gelding when they reached the narrow flat where saskatoon brush marked the steep edge of the waterhole.

For a moment it appeared she intended clearing the brush

to plunge into the pool. But some instinct must have warned her the bank was too steep for her now. Swerving abruptly, she circled headlong into the belly-deep thicket, head turned on her beautifully arched neck, looking back at her pursuer.

Suddenly the air was cracked by a sharp and cruel sound. It was the shrieking zing of ambushing wire, swiftly stretched taut. Luck's flashing sorrel body reared in snorting surprise. But it was too late to free her adventurous, nervous feet from the murderous barbs.

The drove behind her fanned back in noisy fear. Lane tumbled from the back of the gray and ran to help the mare. But she had seldom allowed him to touch her, and he could not touch her now. Her slashing hoofs drove him back as she fought with all the fury of her bronco heritage against the treacherous spite wire which had been so cunningly concealed in the thicket.

Afterward, Tory wondered how long she stood at the edge of the slope, staring down at the sinister tableau. It was like some horrible nightmare of unreal motion, with the drove sheering back and away, Rover barking shrilly as he darted in and out of the thicket, and Luck's squeals of fright and pain horrible in the air.

She saw Lane try again and again to reach Luck's head. Once, she knew from the way his arm jerked, his hand was caught in the barbs. She cried out, aware that he could not hear her, but crying a warning nevertheless, as the mare threshed mightily in the brush.

Each violent, frenzied movement of the young mare only drew the barbs deeper into the precious flesh as Lane fought to free her. He pressed in, dangerously close to the maddened hoofs which sometimes flashed above his head. But he was powerless to prevent the sickening tear of flesh, or stop the spurting flow of bright red blood.

Luck made a last valiant fight against the wire. She thrust forelegs out, rearing back. The movement only drew the

wire, hopelessly entangled about her legs now, tighter in her wounds. Her strength and her life flowed out of her.

Tory saw Lane stiffen, saw him stand rigid, staring across the level flat north of the waterhole toward the low, unpainted buildings that belonged to Herman Schultz. His rigid stillness frightened Tory, suddenly. Gulping back a sob, she ran down the slope toward him.

"Lane!" she cried out at the top of her lungs. She cried again and again. He did not turn. She reached his side and spoke again.

He turned his head and stared at her unblinkingly.

"She's—dead." He passed a hand dazedly across his brow and looked down at the sorrel, motionless forever now.

His dull voice chilled Tory. She understood his grief. She put a hand out toward him, then drew it swiftly back. Tears were running unchecked down his cheeks. One splashed on Tory's hand before she could snatch it back again.

Wide-eyed, she stared at him, and desolation entered her soul.

With a sob in her throat, Tory stumbled through the brush, which was already losing its foliage, and ran back up the slope. Lane had hurt her before. But no hurt had been so deep, so terrible, as this, that he could shed tears over a horse, and yet have been apparently indifferent to the loss of his own son.

In the house she leaned against the wall and looked about as if she were seeing everything for the first time. Her glance traveled from object to object; from one piece of makeshift furniture to the next; over the unplastered walls, the uneven floor. In the beginning she had made the best of it all. She had not minded too much the primitive bareness. At first there had been the bright flame of their love to lighten everything. Later, she had tried so desperately hard to regain that glory.

But now as she stared about she knew that from the beginning, from the very moment when she had come into the

farmyard, riding at Lane's side, from the moment those shadows had reached up the slope to touch them, she had been giving ground, yielding her happiness step by step. Now she understood even her own unreasonable actions.

The shadows had won. This hurt was beyond endurance. There was nothing left which was worth fighting for. Dead love left only gray ashes. One could not live by those. Closing her eyes, Tory saw Lane as she had first known him—a tall, gallant figure with wind-tossed black hair, standing looking down into her eyes. She had thought she understood the supplication in his dark eyes.

She had not understood. Lane did not need her. He needed nothing but the land and his horses. Let the prairie have him back. Let Fern have him back—for now she was sure that no matter what they said, something between them was what lay at the bottom of the evasions and the mystery. Let him sink back into his old sickness as he would without her.



Chapter 29. In the weeks following the death of the sorrel, Tory tried to ignore the gaunt hollowness of Lane's cheeks and the harassed anxiety in his eyes. She hugged her own grief, and taught herself to look at his lean face and powerful body without feeling that old flare of pride. Indeed, she taught herself not to look at him at all.

Through much of the chill and windy fall she brooded, nursing resentment until it encompassed everything about her—treeless land and frosty chill, dismal wind and lengthening nights. The sun, moving southward as the days shortened, was again setting behind the pickets on the bluff. When Tory had arrived on the prairie, those pickets had been starkly new, bright in the sun. They were weathered gray and inconspicuous now, and few of the newcomers knew that the small enclosure was there.

As the bleak and shortened days came on, Tory thought more and more often of what she had seen in Harry's eyes, that day in the store. He was going back to the life she longed for with all her heart and soul. She brooded, saying little to Lane. He in turn had little to say to her.

If Tory had understood how close to complete defeat he was, since the death of Luck, she might have shown him sympathy. But she could not understand that the loss of a horse was in any way comparable to the loss of a son. She could not understand the dreams he had pinned to the young mare. In spite of his determination to breed a super-strain, there had

been no other hopeful foal from his mares in the four years he had possessed Pitch.

Perhaps there would never be another like Luck.

Absorbed in her own self-pity, Tory knew nothing of the despair and the worry in Lane's heart. He came to his meals, and ate in a kind of grim silence which had a certain doggedness to it. The gruff shortness of his voice those days reminded her of the rasp of the harsh dry grass which had grown up on the fireguard during the summer, and was now dead.

At noon one day, when a gusty and cold wind banged doors and filled the air with flying bits from a dozen straw stacks on Jarvis Prairie, Tory looked across the table at Lane, and saw the closed and remote face of a stranger. She felt more acutely than she had ever felt before that there were behind his brooding eyes secret places she neither knew nor understood.

Swif's wagon stopped briefly at the gate. In answer to his halloo Lane went to the door. Swif was on his way home from town.

"Wheat is going up steady, this week," Swif called. "And Watts has sold his store. Here's the *Weekly Free Press*." He tossed the paper to Lane and drove on.

Lane returned to take his place without speaking. He seldom spoke any more. They ate their meal in silence except for the prattle of Patsy. But today the silence had a weight heavier than words, and at length Lane looked up to find Tory's eyes upon him.

His fork went back to his plate again. Their glance held, and Tory felt in it a finality that made her catch her breath sharply. Lane spoke in sudden harshness.

"Sure, I'm a failure, all right," he said through twisted lips, "Talk big, but accomplish nothing. Twice you've wanted to leave the prairie. I'm willing you should leave now. I'll sell a team, if the flax won't bring enough money. You can go, free as air."

She stared back at him, feeling her face drain, and aware of a pain somewhere in the region of her heart.

"Do you—want me—to go?" she managed at last, twisting her fingers together in her lap. She had wanted to go, and here was the way. Or had she really wanted to leave? The pain around her heart grew sharper.

"Well, I'm offering to get you the money. I don't sell a team without dire necessity." His words were brutal in their implication. He got up and stood.

Outside, the wind veered and flung itself at the house, first from the west and then from the south. Tory heard the buffeting sound. It was like a mournful dirge. She sat looking dully at Lane's belt buckle. She remembered how she had liked the way he stood, the way clothes fitted his hard and muscular frame. He dominated the small room now. In comparison to his strength, every other man was weak. Harry's light compliments, his frank admiration and suave manners had been exciting. Lane had had little time for that. But perhaps under his moody silence he searched as desperately to understand her as she had tried to understand him. With an impulsive cry she rose and took a step toward him.

But he turned away with abrupt decision and closed the door behind him. The sound echoed "This is the end—the end—the end—" in Tory's heart, while outdoors the strong wind whipped and gloated, and Lane strode down the slope to work at the fence.

Patsy slipped from her chair at the table and Tory did not see her go. She sat again, stonily staring before her.

She moved with sudden decision at last, and called Patsy two or three times, while she dressed in feverish haste to go to town. The child came at last, and she brushed her hair with impatient haste.

"Where have you been?"

"Playhouse." Patsy talked surprisingly well for a two-year-

old, and when she said playhouse now Tory knew she meant the old abandoned soddy beyond the fireguard.

At the barn she harnessed a horse and backed it between the buggy shafts. A few minutes later the vehicle was spinning down the road. She was on her way, now. She rubbed her burning cheek. What should she say to Harry?

Beyond the bridge a wagon was halted in the middle of the road. Tory pulled out to pass it. One of the Chastek boys stood beside the team mending the much-patched harness with a length of old wire.

"Good afternoon, Steve," Tory said pleasantly. The youth returned her greeting gravely. Tory would have driven on without a backward glance, but Patsy pulled her sleeve.

"Mama, look at fonny shoes."

Tory looked. Steve's feet were wrapped in burlap bound on with binder twine.

"Hush," she warned the child, hoping Steve had not heard the shrill, childish words. But the sight of those pitiful rags angered her, strengthened her determination to do this thing she had set out to do. She would go with Harry, remove *her* child from a land where such extremities could be. She flicked the whip at her horse impatiently.

Big Jon was re-plowing his fireguard. He had completed one around the nearby school. It was a fresh black rectangle as Tory passed. She returned Big Jon's salute mechanically as she hurried past and up the long rise toward the town.

As the buggy wheels spun across the tracks a tumbling mustard rolled jerkily down the street. It was caught first by the wheels, then again by the horse's feet, before a gust tore it free and swept it away again. Tory watched it, idly, as she tied up to the rail on the now-deserted street. It was hours past mail time and there was no one in town.

At the door of Harry's store she had a moment of panic. Had she read into Harry's eyes that other day more than had actually been there? She hesitated, looking back down the road

toward the distant farm buildings beyond the creek. Perhaps, if Harry had not opened the door at that moment—

"Victoria! Have you heard? I've sold my stores!" He drew her in. The wind caught her hat. She snatched at it, held it awkwardly until he closed the door.

"Yes, yes, I heard." The wind had made her breathless, she told herself firmly.

"I'll be Home for Christmas! Think of an English Christmas, Victoria!"

"It will be wonderful," she agreed, ill at ease.

Harry took an elaborate box of candy from a shelf and gave it to Patricia. The child gazed at it in open-mouthed wonder. Tory protested, surprised to feel annoyance at his deed.

"She's too small to have such a large box of sweets, Harry!"

"Nonsense! It won't hurt her. Take it behind the counter, child," he commanded, then smiled into Tory's eyes. "You look extremely well today, Victoria—and lovely!"

"Well, I—I—" Flustered by the pointed compliment, she felt color flooding her face, and in sudden embarrassment looked at his hands where they rested idly on the edge of the counter. In sharp contrast to Lane's work-roughened ones, they were smooth and well kept. No doubt business had its problems, and even its stark failures. But the life of a business man was so much softer than the life of a farmer.

"You look even better, when you blush!" Harry laughed.

The laughter jarred upon her faintly. The annoyance reminded her of why she had come. To go Home with Harry looked less desirable than it had an hour ago. But she had no alternative. Lane no longer wanted her.

"You'll be in England for Christmas this year," she said unsteadily, clenching her hands at her sides. What did one say to a man one had decided to run away with?

"Yes, Home for Christmas! This year and all years to come!" Harry's hearty voice removed, for the moment, the necessity of saying anything. "I never liked Canadian win-

ters, and I'm done with them now. I have made fifty thousand dollars out of the country." His shrewd, pale blue eyes glowed with self-satisfaction. "That will do for me."

"Fifty thousand dollars?" Tory echoed faintly. The sum staggered her imagination. Fifty thousand dollars—and last week she had had to cross a sixty-cent tin of jam from her grocery list!

"That's right. Think of English life on that! Victoria—" He leaned close suddenly, "Victoria, doesn't it all sound good to you? Don't tell me you're happy here. Come with me. There would be scandal at first, but people would forget. Back Home they need not know exactly what happened." He was pleading with the wistful eagerness of a boy. "This miserable country is not for you, either."

Home! Well—didn't she want it? Wasn't he right? No great empty spaces, or lonely, bleak winter months! Near Mother and Sarah and Harriet! Tory drew a quick breath and stared into Harry's eyes.

He drew her close, swiftly.

"Victoria, think how happy we can be on fifty thousand dollars! That's almost ten thousand pounds! Victoria, my dear—" The last words were a demand. His lips closed down on hers.

Was she mad, allowing this? She was still Lane's wife. She still believed in right and wrong. She had come here—for this—just this, it was true—and yet—

"Harry! Stop!" She tore herself out of his arms, shamed and frightened. His lips had felt hot—exciting, and she thrilled from the flattery of his desire.

"Victoria, you must come. We'll forget this God-forsaken prairie, with its stupid clods of people. Forget we ever knew it at all. Life back Home will be quiet, happy." He had her hands in his now, the pressure of his trembling fingers demanding response. "You know you don't belong here. The life will destroy you."

Tory's heart was pounding under her blouse, but her fingers turned cold in the warmth of Harry's hands. She was not sure if that swift beating in her breast came from rapture. There was in her none of the wild ecstasy that Lane's arms had given her again and again—and could give her still.

But it had been so long since Lane's hand had even touched her own. In a wave of bitterness she closed her eyes against the memory and her fingers returned the insistent pressure of Harry's. It was sweet, anyway, to be desired. And the wild happiness she had experienced with Lane was at an end . . . lost . . . lost . . . She sobbed rackingly, then caught herself and was quiet in Harry's arms.

"We can have a wonderful life, Victoria," Harry urged, "I'll make more money, too. I didn't make much of this money on the stores, you know." There was a gleam of self-satisfaction in his shrewd eyes as she stared up at him.

"Not—on the stores?" Tory said wonderingly. "How else could you make money?" She pushed away from him, suddenly knowing the answer without being told.

"I made it on the wheat board!" he exulted.

"You mean—gambling on—trading in wheat futures?" She felt her hands going colder. She heard Patricia humming to herself somewhere out of sight at the back of the store.

"Sure. It's the only way to make money fast out of this country. Farmers *have* to sell early, and somebody stands to profit, just by using cash and brains."

Tory remembered Lane's explosive denunciation of speculators. Farmers struggled, toiled, hungered, with only hope to keep them going through drought and hail and frost. Big Jon and Ole Nystrom, a dozen others, lived on nothing but hope this year. And young Steve Chastek, walking along the autumn-hard roads with only rags around his feet! Five cents more a bushel would have meant so much to all of them, yet Harry piled up money effortlessly.

Through the heat and the wind homesteaders slaved, while

Harry and his kind lived in ease, waiting only for that fall date when the farmers to whom they had extended credit must pay their debts. Few farmers could hold their crops for price advances. But the idle speculators could wait and profit, often conspiring against the farmers' interests.

All this flashed through Tory's mind in the instant that she stood staring into Harry's light blue eyes where selfish greed showed to her suddenly clarified vision. She looked at his hands, still holding fast to hers. With a swift movement of distaste she jerked her hands away. Had she thought with admiration, just a moment or two earlier, that Harry's hands were smooth and soft? She shuddered now.

Smooth? Soft? Those hands were the talons of a bird of prey, cruelly gripping the throat of every farmer on the prairie, wringing out of him the small, hard-earned profit that was in each bushel of wheat! She did not realize that the common passion of the prairie people was possessing her. Harry Watts was an exploiter of the soil. She was of the soil herself. Instinctively she hated him, realizing what he truly was.

In a flash all the foggy doubts, the unhappiness of the long months, were swept out of Tory's heart. Lane was one of the toiling farmers, laboring through the year from sheer love of the land. Quick sympathy with his difficulties stirred within her a rush of tenderness for him.

"Come now, Victoria. What's your answer? I'll be leaving next week. But I can still get reservations for you." Harry spoke with a trace of impatience, but there was brusque confidence in his voice. He had no doubt about her answer.

Tory stepped back suddenly. She spoke breathlessly.

"I'm not going with you. I ought not to have come here today. I thought—oh, Patsy, bring the candy and put it on the counter. Tell the man you cannot take it. Tell him thank you, darling. Tell him prettily." With trembling arms Tory

reached toward the child, who came from the back of the store at her call.

"Pretty box." Patsy lifted her small determined chin mutinously.

"Not for—little Pony." Tory placed the box on the counter. "Come, Pony." She repeated the homely nickname. It was the first time she had ever uttered it.

"I want her to have the box," Harry insisted. "But Victoria, you cannot mean you intend wasting your life on a prairie farm? Think what a life we could have!" he cried incredulously. "Victoria, I want you—" He tried to take her hands.

"Don't, Harry." She pushed him away. He tried to thrust the box of candy into Patsy's hands. Tory shoved it back, trembling with anger.

"She cannot have it, Harry," she said sharply. "I don't want her to have anything bought with the sweat and the blood of the farmers."

Then she was through the door and outside, hurrying toward her buggy, and towing Pony firmly by the hand.

"Sit down quickly, Pony. We've got to hurry home to Daddy. Daddy needs us, quick!" She lifted the child into the rig, and fumbled with the hitching strap. Her fingers trembled until she felt she would never get the simple knot untied.

Did Lane want her? That was all that interested her now.

Tory flicked the whip over the horse. Astonished, it darted down the street, tail switching in indignation. Another tumbling mustard rolled past, spreading its obnoxious seed as it rolled. There had been no such weeds before settlers and the rails came. Weeds. That was what Harry and his kind were.

"Lane, Lane, I've been so blind and stupid!" her heart kept repeating. "Let us begin again, back where we lost the road!"



Chapter 30. Tory flicked the whip over her horse with urgency. It broke into an outraged lope as the buggy ascended the slight grade to the rail crossing. Wind whipped the dashboard back with a noisy thump, but Tory was conscious of neither wind nor sound. She was seeing Lane—as she had known him in the beginning, feeling again the thrill of his arrogant virility.

Going back over the months and the years, her heart sought that place in the course of their marriage where they had begun to lose each other. Had the first wedge been the return of Fern? Had it been earlier than that—the dark shadow of Sentinel Hill on that very first night? Or had it been in the moment she saw for the second time that frozen blankness in Lane's eyes?

She had tried with the zeal of great faith to reach behind that wall, to reach again the Lane of those first days. She had at last come to understand he had an inversion of his mind—some past horror of which she knew nothing. She had sought desperately, jealously to burn it from his mind and heart with new emotional crises centering around herself. Her own understanding had been distorted by selfishness. A sudden sob rose in her throat.

Lane was working now at his fence around the waterhole. As the buggy slanted down the hill toward Jon's farm, Tory saw him, with Swif working beside him, against the late crimson of the thicket there. The dry grass on slope and hill, along

every fence and road allowance, sighed on the wind with mournful hopelessness as Tory passed.

The shrill whistle of a coming freight on the railway rode the wind, too. Tory turned her head, then froze with a chill of fear. A wind-whipped funnel of black smoke from the engine lifted from the grassy right-of-way, leaving a licking stain of red flame!

Prairie fire was one horror of the prairie Tory had not experienced. But it took no imagination to understand that with the strong wind and the extremely dry grass this fire meant destruction unless it was immediately stopped. In the moment she stared at that flaring fire with fear-dilated eyes, the flames spread by acres!

"Whoa! Whoa!" She laid back on the reins, trying to stop the horse. "Fire! Fire down the tracks!" she shouted back toward the town where men hammered at a new building. But there was no use turning back now. The black smoke billowing skyward would instantly tell the town. She must hurry forward and warn Jon and Fern.

"Fire! Fire!" she screamed again, with all the power of her lungs. The horse spurted forward, catching her panic. Pony bounced on the seat. Tory put out a hand to keep the child from falling.

The gusty wind veered maliciously, flinging dangerous sparks far and wide. A flaming brand fell beside the trail before Tory, and a red stain spread with the speed of light.

She stood up in the buggy, urging the horse on. Hurry—hurry—they might be cut off. She coughed as acrid smoke billowed into her face. Patricia whimpered with fright.

"Hide your face against Mama's coat," Tory commanded, aware that her eyes stung. She plied the whip in gasping desperation.

The fire was racing down the hill now, licking swiftly along the road allowance toward Fern's house where Jon had been plowing a fresh fireguard only that afternoon. Why, Tory

thought, a dry sob in her throat, had she ever scoffed at fireguards? God grant that Jon's eight furrows would be enough!

Men were racing from the town now. Some on horseback, some on foot and others in buggies, Tory saw their dim shapes through the billowing smoke and understood their panic. With such a wind the town itself could be wiped out.

Her buggy bounced over the freshly plowed guard and into Fern's yard. Fern ran forward and snatched Pony from the seat.

"Hurry! Hurry! Tie your horse to this wagon."

Gasping and coughing, Tory literally tumbled to the ground. The smoke was hot. There was no time for stabling the horse, even if the barn across the road had been safe.

"Oh, the stacks!" Fern cried. Tory turned to see Jon's hay aflame. And that hay stood close against the new barn Jon had built that autumn.

Swif and Lane were riding recklessly across the creek. Tory prayed for Lane's comforting presence. But Fern cried out again.

"A spark inside the fireguard!" She darted forward with a sack she had soaked in the rain barrel, and beat frantically at the fire. Another spark fell at Tory's feet. She snatched the robe from the buggy, soused it in the barrel, and fought desperately at Fern's side.

Her eyes smarted unbearably. Smoke all but stopped her breath. But sparks from the burning stacks were showering around them now. Side by side, she and Fern beat at the flames. Around the stacks shouting men, forced back helplessly by the heat of the burning hay, cursed in defeat.

"The roof! Spark on the roof!" Fern was already placing a board on the rain barrel, clambering up. Tory tossed the dripping sack to her. She did not know she was sobbing. She did not know, either, until she turned her head an instant, that the fire had swept on, that it was across the creek now, fanned up the slope by the veering wind which spread the

flames northward, too, spreading them fanwise up the side of Sentinel.

Lane's galloping horse had almost reached the schoolhouse, also protected by Jon's plowing, when the fire jumped the creek. He turned his horse, and whipped wildly toward his own buildings. Tory watched the race, knowing only one thing clearly. Their own fireguard had not been plowed over that fall!

Lane's horse rebelled against the searing heat. He had only a halter to guide it with. It shied and bucked, backed and reared dangerously. Lane spurred it on relentlessly. With a desperate lunge the horse cleared the line of flame, to race madly toward the barns.

The wind twisted again. A single tongue of fire licked through the weeds of the neglected fireguard. By the time Lane, and the men racing up the road, reached the yard, the house was flaming fiercely.

"The house is burning!" Tory kept screaming the words. Once she started forward desperately, but Fern, who had come down from the roof after beating out the flame there, caught her back.

"You cannot help. The men will do what they can. Just pray that the garden strip will save Lane's barns and stacks."

"But my things—everything—"

Fire leaped from the burning house, unrolling across the trampled yard to the garden's edge. It was beaten back as the dying wind twisted in a last convulsive gust. It sped feebly in the other direction, and died at the edge of the road down which Tory had seen progress march to the prairie. Smoke-begrimed men turned homeward wearily.

Tory had forgotten the black stallion in the barn until she saw Lane lead Pitch out. He leaped up, and with tossing head the horse came pounding down the hot and still smoking slope, toward the spot where Fern and Tory stood. Pitch reared, snorting, as Lane slid to the ground. Sandy appeared,

Tory had no idea from where. Everything was a nightmare.

"The house is gone." Lane spoke dully, standing rigid, holding the reins in his hand, while behind him Pitch danced and pawed.

Tory stared at the empty spot across the creek, knowing suddenly that the shack had been dear to her, that it had been a haven, that a few minutes earlier she had been racing back to it, and to Lane—if he still wanted her. The thought brought her back sharply. She looked quickly into his eyes.

"Lane—"

But Fern cried out suddenly. "Look!" She was pointing up the steep sides of Sentinel Hill. Tory turned, staring in peculiar fascination at the flare of licking flames at the summit. The pickets there were burning with an intense blaze.

Those flames on the hilltop broke some long tension in Tory. A strange new freedom, a feeling in almost too-sharp relief from the hopelessness she had felt a moment before, left her half hysterical.

"They're gone, gone. Those horrible, jail-like bars are gone!"

Fern's eyes widened slowly in her smoke-smudged face. She stared at Tory. Suddenly she moved to place her arm swiftly about Tory's shoulders.

"Forgive me, Tory," she said gently. "I thought you knew. I was so sure Lane had told you—and that you understood the horror was not real, that it was only in his mind—"

Tory wrenched away from Fern, and eluded Lane's restraining hand when he sought to touch her.

"I didn't know. I wasn't told anything—" she cried in shrill passion. "I know only that Lane's heart froze to me, that his mind seemed to go blank when he looked at that hill. At first I took it as a sickness—I tried—now, I can't stand—" Emotion took her by the throat and stopped her words.

Sandy placed his kindly hand upon her arm.

"Noo, noo, lass. Ye should hae known—"

Lane spoke then, swinging upon Sandy in passionate anger, his voice lashing out like a whip.

"Tell her, then," he shouted defiantly, "tell her everything! Tell her—all—the murder—the murder!"

"Don't torture yourself, Lane," Fern said gently, soothingly. "It's not true—"

But Lane was beside himself now, his voice shaking with passion and tension. The muscles of his face stood out in cords and knots.

"Tell her I'm a murderer! Tell her I've killed, killed! Red-handed murder! Oh, God! Tell her!"

"Nay, nay lad. We all know it wae an accident. Ross Stokes desarved tae die, and it was same as by his own hand," Sandy said soothingly. "It wae good riddance."

Lane swore furiously. "We agreed to forget—never to speak of it again—we agreed!"

Tory stared at Lane, understanding dawning. So Ross Stokes had not died on a border ranch, as she had believed. But that did not matter. That expressionless glare was no longer in Lane's eyes. He was not frozen-faced. He was overwrought in a normal way.

"Lane—" she went to him quickly. Her eyes offered sympathy, understanding.

His fury left him as abruptly as it had come. He stared at her, wearily, with hopelessness and hurt in his eyes.

"Lane, I'm here," she implored.

"I don't want your pity."

"I love you. I love you, Lane, I *need* you," she cried.

"You know what it's like, then," he replied stonily. "I needed you once. I loved you, too. But you shut me out when I needed you—"

He turned abruptly and leaped to the back of the horse which was circling so uneasily behind him. Before Tory could cry out, or call him back, the wild black was streaking over

the coulee bridge, his swift hoofs pounding a tattoo that echoed hollowly in Tory's heart.

Rejected, she stood alone, watching horse and rider mount the slope, going swiftly to pass the smouldering ruins that had been her house, and move on at a wild gallop into the desolate country beyond the Hildrick farm. For many miles out there, isolation still held the land.



Chapter 31. Tory became aware, after what seemed a very long time, that Sandy was at her elbow. She turned.

"Now tell me," she commanded him simply.

"Aye, lass. But ye would hae had tae know Ross Stokes tae r-rightly understand. Ye've doubtless gleaned he wasna mourned over much. And ye've got tae remember the loneliness and the emptiness of the land," he warned. "The like hae driven mony to hopeless madness."

Tory nodded. She could understand that, remembering the utter, aching loneliness of her own first summer on the prairie.

"B-but Ross Stokes?" She wanted to know where and how he fitted into the picture.

"Well, Ross never rightly lived here at all, as I told ye once. He reckoned to be worrking for a cattleman down Willow Bunch way. Fern lived here alone, doin' the homestead duties. Ross came home once a month or so, bringin' liquor and sometimes a wanderin' half-breed, to help him empty his bottles. Sometimes Fern had to seek safety wi' Lane or wi' me," Sandy explained gently. "That was why, when the trial came, there was them as wanted tae make something evil o' the affair for Lane."

"But just what—happened?" Tory persisted, feeling keenly the poignant, aching loneliness of the empty plains, that vanished summer.

Sandy was remembering it, too. He sighed deeply.

"Ye've known the heat and the emptiness, Lass. Ye ken what the everlastin' silence is like. Lane had nae wheat crop

that year, but he had his horrses. He was greatly worrit. There'd been rumors of horse thievin' along the Border. And we were both worrit over Fern. We could see her time was near, and Ross didna come home."

Tory started in surprise at the knowledge that Fern had had a child. Yet how stupid she had been not to have guessed! So many incidents and facts from the past told that plainly now.

"That day," Sandy continued, "I'd gone to Flatland. We were all out o' coal oil for the lamps, and I had nae tobacco. The day before, Lane and I had mixit gopher poison, so through the day I was gone, he spread the poisoned grain all down the slope, and along the trail right up tae the ridge, yonder. He spread it thick, and when dusk fell, he had perhaps half a peck of the wheat left.

"He wae late wi' his supper. We'd had no mail for six weeks, and for long he'd stood out, waiting—hopeful tae hear my wagon, before he made the tea."

Sandy's Scotch burr grew stronger as his speech quickened. As he spoke Tory could feel acutely the sharp damp, and the darkness of that night as Lane had stood listening for the first faint creak of wheels. So much of prairie life was waiting—waiting for wagons at night—for mail, after weeks of isolation—for spring—for rain—for reliable haying weather—for autumn and for harvest—then—waiting for the spring again!

"And as he stood there in the darrk, he heard Fern's sudden scream down here across the creek. The sound came through the dusk twice. In a minute Lane was on his way down the slope. He said afterwards he didna stop tae think." Sandy drew a long, slow breath.

"Yes?" Tory prompted impatiently.

"Ross had come home crazy drrunk. He had Fern backed in tae a corner o' the shack, flourishin' a blacksnake whip at her when Lane got there. She had a fierce and ugly red bruise down her cheek. Blood ran from it down over her dress.

"Ross was about to strike the lass with the butt o' the whip

again when Lane broke in. He turned ugly mad, flying at Lane with the slashin' blacksnake. He cut Lane's face, then swung close, usin' the butt as a club. Lane was blinded wi' blood. He had to fight like fury to drive Ross through the door."

Sandy drew breath again. "Lane put him out, at last. He begged him to go on over the creek tae see if I'd got back."

"Did Ross—" Tory could not go on. Her lips were dry. She waited for Sandy to speak again.

"Ross cursed outside, as Lane began to do for Fern, who was in labor then. But the cursin' ceased after a little. Lane said after he didna remember just when. Fern wae in a state, ye can imagine. The puir bairn wae stillborn. It was a long time afore Lane could leave. When he could he rushed out to see if Ross had fetched me.

"His own horse was by, cropping the grass, reins draggin' where he'd dropped them. There was lantern light in his own barn across the creek there—" he indicated Lane's barn, beside the smouldering ruins of the house across the coulee. "He thinkit I'd returned, and he came ridin' pell-mell up the slope tae—"

"You heard him coming?" Tory knew her breath was coming faster, as if she herself had in truth been there that tense night. How often she had heard hoofbeats on that slope!

"I wae comin', lass, but I was only half way down from the ridge when Lane walked into his barn and saw Ross, more crazy drunk than iver, but still on his feet, coxin' the black stallion to eat some o' that left-over gopher poison."

Tory sensed the tension of that past moment, knowing, and understanding now, the depths of the rage which must have risen in Lane.

"But it didn't poison Pitch." Tory's voice was breathless.

"I'll explain it all, lass. Lane didna remember Ross might be mad wi' jealousy, and that he wae crazy drrunk tae boot. He just saw that pan o' poisoned grain under the nose of

Pitch. Until he saw Ross stretched flat at his feet he didna know he'd lifted his hand—but he had. And it wae to swing the butt o' the blacksnake he had wi' him."

Tory knew how quickly Lane's anger could flare. There was the time he had struck Schultz in the wheat field. She remembered now how he had stood, afterward, dazedly staring at his hands. Other things she remembered, too. How he had known, told her what to do for Melsie, the night Timmie was born. The swift, unreasonable rage Jon Iverson had roused with mere mention of poisoned grain.

Now at last she understood fully the complex moods and angers that made Lane Jarvis what he was. Everything fitted into the pattern. Since that long-ago night his mind had been sick—sick with an inversion that forced him to turn everything concerned with the tragedy in on himself, and against which he had waged a hard and solitary fight.

"When you came, you—?" Tory asked.

"I came directly. Lane was still standin' there staring down at—at Ross, when I stopped my wagon and walked into the barrn." Sandy passed a hand before his eyes as if he would remove from his memory, if he could, the sight he had seen that night.

As if she had been there, Tory felt the sharp drama of that long-gone time. She felt, too, the terrible moment which must have been Lane's when his rage died and he found the blacksnake butt swinging from his hand, and saw Ross Stokes bleeding and dead at his feet.

"How dreadful—for Lane," she whispered.

"Aye," Sandy agreed. "And worse for the fact that at the trial it came out that even if the horse hae eaten all the grain in the pan, the poison wouldna hae kilt him."

Trial? Tory's mind jerked up abruptly. Of course there had been a trial. Violent death was a crime whatever its cause.

"You were—there?" She could not bring herself to say the word directly.

Sandy nodded briefly. "Things lookit black for Lane, too. Fern is a handsome lass, and men do commit murrder over women. And he had helped her mony times that summer. There was plenty of nasty talk, all right. Ross was dead. That was sartin. *We* knew he'd been a wrong'un, but murrder is murrder."

What had intervened to save Lane? Her eyes must have asked the question. Sandy continued:

"If it hadna been for the breed, brought in fra Willow Bunch almost at the last minute, Lane might not hae been freed. But there was sartin evidence that Ross was the horse thief who'd been runnin' horses down over the Border for long enough. That evidence freed Lane from the Law. But the killing haunted him, crazed him. I had faith when you came he was saved from that. I still hope, lass. For now it is all in the open. The cloud is gone from between you."

Tory could not speak, and Sandy stood before her in silent sympathy. Presently Patsy tugged at Tory's skirts. She dropped to her knees and held the child tight. Tears slid silently down her cheeks.

"Tears will help, lass. Tears will help." Sandy patted her shoulder, then took Patsy's hand and walked with her toward the house.

Tory rose and stood straight in the gathering twilight, letting her gaze go from point to point along the endless horizon. She surveyed all that lay between her and there—the winding course of the creek, the varying roll of coulee banks, the long slope and the new fence Lane had worked so hard to build. Here and there a post smouldered in the dying wind.

And as she looked at everything she knew all of it had a new and different beauty at the moment. It was as if she saw for the first time country absolutely new to her eyes. For the first time she felt she belonged to it completely, felt it had a place for her.

Somewhere beyond the edge of the east there Lane was riding. A thought struck fear to her heart—suppose Lane did not come back? Suppose this might be the time when Pitch would win in the battle of wills which went on endlessly between horse and master?

“Tory, you must come in. It is very cold.”

Tory started, realizing that Fern was speaking at her side, that she had been repeating her words, over and over. “You’ll stay with Jon and me until you get a place fixed again, won’t you?”

“Yes,” Tory said calmly, “yes, I’ll come in soon—soon.” She wanted a little more time to think, to feel the vastness of the land about her. She knew now that she wanted to grow with the country. It was a violent country, but it was magnificent, too. Its future strength would be what Lane, and other strong men like him, what she and other pioneer women, made it.



Chapter 32. Before supper was over in Fern's neat but small shack that evening, neighbors began to arrive. Buggies came from every direction, offering aid to the Jarvis family, which had lost a house, and to Jon Iverson, whose barn had burned.

"Ay got extra qvilt," Emma Nystrom offered. Her buggy held other things, too—odd dishes, a jar or two of canned saskatoon fruit, a neatly ironed apron which was more Tory's size than Emma's.

Ole had brought an odd horse collar and a bridle to replace some of the harness which had burned in Jon's barn.

The family's eager generosity touched Tory deeply.

Mr. and Mrs. Schiller arrived to offer what they had.

"My dear, there is an odd table in the loft at the livery stable. Good as new, but we never seemed to have room for it here. You're welcome to it, if you can use it."

Jim unloaded a set of double harness, turned heartily to Jon. "Not keeping as many horses as I did. Got plenty of harness."

The evening passed like a dream. Tory gave her thanks dazedly for the kettles, the chair, the handful of bleached flour sacks and the various other offerings. Only part of her was here. The other part was somewhere out in the night with Lane, riding across bleak and cold prairie to God knew where.

Everyone had gone, at last. Fern turned up the wick and sighed.

"It isn't any use. You don't hear a word I say."

Tory started guiltily. Fern's words were true. Every nerve in her body was straining to her ears, listening out beyond this small room for the hollow sound of hoofs on the bridge.

Big Jon had gone to bed in the curtained recess at one end of the room. Patsy slept the deep sleep of childhood, in a bed Fern had made for her on the floor. The couch waited for Tory, but she refused to retire. Fern sat with her through the hours.

One by one the lights of the town went out, and presently the lamp glowing steadily through the window, shining down the trail, was the only gleam on all the land. Tory kept fighting an impulse to push the lamp still closer to the window, to lift it, move it up and down, signaling, as Sandy had taught her to do, so many, many months ago.

Fern understood the constant twitching of her hands.

"Pitch won't need a light, if Lane turns him homeward."

If Lane turns homeward. Tory knew too well that as long as the consuming fury flared within Lane, he would hold the reins taut, plunging away. After that—she refused to think beyond that point. He had told her—was it only a few hours before?—he no longer wanted her, by offering her the money with which to go Home.

Home? Why, that land she had left beyond the sea was hazy in her memory now. This wild and lonely land with space and freedom was Home—if *Lane came back*.

It was not the beat of flying hoofs which brought Fern and Tory swiftly to the door just before dawn. It was the night-weary mournful creak of slow wagon wheels. Darkness still lay thick on road and coulee as they strained eyes toward the doleful sound.

"Must be someone coming through from Flatland." Fern's voice was low. But in both their minds was the knowledge that wagons no longer rode the long trails at night. Now there were elevators, rails, and a post-office nearer than Flatland.

"Do you think—think—" Tory could not put into words the fear which sprang instantly into her mind, as those wheels rumbled over the bridge.

Fern did not speak to answer the unspoken dread. The two of them waited, knowing with grim certainty that those wheels would leave the trail to stop before Fern's door. The intuitive knowledge was a weight against their hearts.

The driver was a stranger. Tory sprang forward, her hands catching at the edge of the wagon box, her face uplifted in the darkness.

"H-have you seen Lane Jarvis?" Air was an obstruction in her throat over which she could scarcely speak. Would the man know who Lane Jarvis was? But of course everyone between Flatland and Jarvis knew who Lane Jarvis was!

The man turned his head, slowly. Tory's eyes followed his. She saw the blanket-covered figure in the low wagon box.

Tory caught her breath sharply. Then the prone figure stirred with a faint moan.

"Wh-what happened?" Her voice sounded shrill in her ears. Jon, roused now, moved quickly toward the wagon as the stranger stepped down. The eastern horizon had a thin, expectant look now, beyond the top of the slope.

"He busted some ribs and knocked himself out, hard. Nothin' worse, I guess," the stranger spoke. "His horse stepped in a badger hole and fell on him. My dog barked for an hour or more before I took him serious." He and Jon lifted Lane gently down.

Fern ran before the slow-moving cavalcade to make the couch ready. "Pour some of that hot coffee, Tory," she commanded as she made way for the men.

"Has he been conscious, Mr. Botts?" Tory brought a hastily filled cup to Lane's rescuer, who had given his name.

"Yes, Mrs. Jarvis. When I found him, and part of the way back. But it's painful, ridin' in a wagon with bones busted.

About the time we passed that last house, back yonder, he caved under again."

"Pitch? The horse?" She wanted to know how everything had happened.

"Well, ma'am, I hope we don't have to shoot the critter." Mr. Botts twisted his cap between his hands. "The poor critter could get on his feet but his forelegs are strained to hell and gone. Not broke, though. He's a fine hoss. I expect he'll come around. I'll take care of him good."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" Tory exclaimed. "How good you are."

Mr. Botts protested he had only done what any good neighbor would do.

Truly, everyone was wonderful.

Neighbors had given her almost enough furniture to set up housekeeping—if she had any place to use it in. But one could scarcely move onto the open prairie so late in the fall. And unless they went heavily into debt, they could not build the house Lane had planned to build, until after another crop was harvested.

Looking across the coulee and up the slope to the spot where only yesterday morning her house had stood, Tory's eyes rested upon the ruined soddy outside the fireguard. With new windows, a door, the roof repaired—but she was dreaming, of course. Probably Lane did not want her back.

Many times that day Lane stirred, moaning. Sometimes he opened his eyes. But it was almost evening before he was fully conscious. Fern had gone out, taking Patricia with her. Later from the window Tory had seen them walking up the burned-over slope.

She was sitting at his head when he opened his eyes. She sprang to his side. When he saw her, he closed his eyes again and turned away with a weary relaxation.

"Lane, it's me. It's Tory. Lane, darling—" Fright put a sharp edge to her voice.

"Pitch—broke—a leg," he muttered incoherently.

"Lane, can you hear me?" Tory's hands were on his where they rested with nerveless inertia on the coverlet. After what seemed to her an eternity his eyes opened again. "Pitch is safe," she said.

He stared at her, as if at first not quite recognizing her. Suddenly he struggled to rise.

"The mares and colts have to be fed! I've got to get up."

"Swif and Sandy are looking after everything," she soothed. "Lie still. I'll get you some coffee."

It was good to have things which were immediate to do—a cup to hold to Lane's lips, a pillow to plump behind his tumbled dark head. Her hand lingered against the glistening curls, and she was filled with warm satisfaction at being close to him. It gave her a strange thrill to know he needed her.

Faint color came into his face, but his eyes remained clouded.

"Pitch is safe," he muttered. "If I'd killed him, I couldn't have stood it."

"You have Pitch," Tory said. "And you have Smudge, and the—the new fi-filly Star had this year."

Lane turned his head and his eyes met hers. Suddenly his look was rational, clear—alight.

"That's the first time I ever heard you call a filly a filly, Tory." He even smiled weakly.

It was a while before she could speak over the choking emotion in her throat. But presently she went on, speaking casually.

"Haven't you enough good colts coming on to build up the kind of drove you hoped for?" She wanted to hear Lane talking about his horses in the old, eager way.

He sighed.

"I guess a man has to reach bottom before he sees things clear. My best horses gone, Pitch left but lame, my ribs caved in, not a house to live in—"

"But we have a house to live in!" Tory cried, her eyes shining. "Big Jon and Ole are up there now, nailing windows into the soddy, fixing the roof, hanging a door. The neighbors have given us the things we need. We can move in tomorrow!"

"You'd move into—*that*?" His dark eyes held hers.

"I'd move anywhere with you, darling." She was clinging to his hands suddenly. Her eyes implored him to understand and believe she meant those words. "If we can begin again." Tears ran down her cheeks.

For a long minute Lane held himself rigid while he stared into her eyes. There was hunger in his face. Her look pledged love, steadfast faith. Though the movement wrung a groan from him, he drew her to him swiftly and buried his face in her bright hair.

"Tory, my dear! If only I had told you everything, that day you came! But I could not. It seemed buried, a grave inside me—and now, *right now, it is gone*. It is wiped out! You have done that for me, Tory! I understand so much now. If only—"

She hushed him quickly with a hand upon his lips.

"No more looking back!" she warned softly. "We'll look forward. This winter may not be easy for us, dearest, but hundreds of others have lived through worse."

"I'll sell Schiller another team," he decided quickly, "and a homesteader beyond town wants to buy one, too. There are plenty of colts coming on. And Pitch will bring more! We'll finish the house plans we once started—remember?"

Tory remembered. Her heart raced riotously. It was good to hear that ring of hope and confidence in Lane's vibrant voice again.

"Next spring," he went on, "we'll build on the edge of the slope, with southern Saskatchewan spread before our windows."

"We'll have a parlor, and bedrooms for the children—"

"And a summer kitchen over the pump—"

Tory's lips trembled with happiness. This was the Lane she had known in the beginning. Their long kiss was interrupted by a childish laugh as Fern and Patsy returned. They fairly burst into the room.

"Mama, Mama," the child screamed excitedly, "look what Auntie Fern found! Look, Mama!" Patricia danced up and down.

Fern held the Belleek teapot. Its pearly translucence was unmarred by smoke. It was impossible that this one thing had survived the fire.

"How—where—" The sight of the teapot seemed to make all Tory's dreams for the future already true. It was the visible sign that dreams could be real.

"In the soddy," Fern smiled, "Pony's playhouse." She placed the pot on the table. Looking at it, Tory knew that of all her possessions, this one useless thing had been her favorite. She blessed Pony's stubborn desire to take the thing to her playhouse. How, and when it had been done, she could guess, remembering how she had called the child so impatiently, the day she was hurrying to drive into town.

"Are the windows in the shack yet?" she demanded of Fern.

"All in. Jon is oiling the stove. The fire has not damaged it at all. You'll be surprised with everything the neighbors have provided."

"They have been so wonderfully kind! And perhaps," she went on unsteadily, "perhaps my new home will be surprised with me!"

She looked at the china teapot. The radiance came not from the light which fell upon it, but from the quality of the fine clay out of which it was fashioned. Tory vowed to make her life like that. Her fingers tightened in Lane's.

From this day forward she wanted to stand at his side, meeting life head-on, as he met it, throwing herself body and soul into the future of the country, as Lane did. Side by side they

would share the excitement of great beginnings. In the end, Canada's prairie would become what she and Lane, and thousands of other men and women with dreams, made it.

Lane stirred and smiled up at her. His eyes were clear, serene. Her soul knew the frozen glare of an obsession would never cloud them again. Her heart swelled with thanksgiving.

THE END

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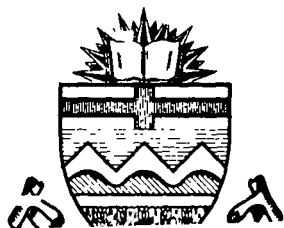
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